
Deforming Electoral Reform

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You probably got a small postcard in the mail this week from the Government of Canada with the headline “Have your say about our democracy”. It announces an online survey which can be found at mydemocracy.ca. Will this survey really give you a say? Are they really seeking your opinions about electoral reform? Good questions; let’s consider:

Some Canadian provinces have already held referenda on electoral reform. Although there is widespread support for a change to the electoral system, no provinces have yet adopted any change, no province has yet agreed to drop the existing system, “first-past-the-post” (FPTP).

During the campaign of 2015, Justin Trudeau promised that Election 2015 would be the last election under the current system. This promise was a ray of sunshine in his “sunny ways” campaign, but there were doubters. The Liberal Party has been the greatest beneficiary of power under our current system. In the last election, they got around 39% of the overall vote, but around 54% of the seats, and 100% of the power. Do they really want change? After “sober second thought”, probably not, but they promised. What to do with that promise?

Spin is important, so a new name was given to the portfolio; our new “Minister of Democratic Institutions” was appointed. Promising, but at the same time suspect because the minister appointed was a young, rookie MP, Maryam Monsef. The NDP and the Conservatives have MPs with considerable experience as critics to this portfolio, Nathan Cullen and Scott Reid respectively.

Nonetheless, the minister began by forming a committee with members from all parties represented in Parliament, in an effort to see if there was a better way to elect Canada’s government. The Liberals even gave up their majority on the committee so that it would more closely reflect the popular vote of the previous election. Promising beginnings indeed!

After months of consultations through town hall meetings, the committee reported that there was no clear consensus among Canadians.

Did they begin this process expecting a strong majority of Canadians to be for or against electoral reform? A quick glance at the voting history of the Liberal Party alone would show that feelings on change are mixed! Would we expect the population-at-large to be significantly different?

Anyway, it couldn’t hurt to spend a few million dollars to find out, right?

Minister Monsef reported to Parliament their recommended solution ... a mathematical formula, the “Gallagher Index”¹. The committee did not agree on much, but they did agree that a different electoral system should match the composition of government as closely as possible to the popular vote.

The actual Gallagher Index formula is more complicated than the current system, and the minister made it clear to Parliament that she felt that it was too complicated.

Neither are the Liberals prepared to embrace a fairer system. The current system has worked so well for them. (The Liberals have held power for approximately 3 of every 4 years since Confederation).

This takes us back to the postcard you got in the mail². Although scattered meetings were held across the country over several months, not all Canadians were able to participate in the town-hall meetings orchestrated by the Special Committee. The postcard campaign just launched announces an online survey that theoretically gives more Canadians an opportunity to provide input.

That's the spin. One thing this survey will not do is yield a clear consensus. It is designed more like a personality quiz³ rather than a democratic tool. And, without a clear consensus, the Liberals will have an excuse to break their election promise. Like many government surveys, the leading questions asked by the survey do not provide participants with real choices and, in some cases, one must choose between two equally unacceptable choices. They are a mixture of "feel-good" manipulation and "lesser-of-two-evils" options, as well as frustrating duplication. Because people could complete it several times, its results will also not be scientific.

Go ahead and complete the survey, it is an opportunity to give your opinion, but it is mostly an excuse for the government to be able to say, "we did our best, but it just didn't work out". (Note that you will be asked to give some personal information at the end; it is unclear whether your opinion will count if you don't⁴).

If you do fill it out, please consider that, while online voting could be convenient, it is far more prone to fraud; CHP does not favour it. Remember also that MPs should be expected to keep their promises; a number of the questions pit the "wishes of the constituents" against the party of the elected MP, a scenario that is not completely relevant to whether we should have electoral reform or not.

Both the Conservatives and the NDP have agreed that a referendum would be the best way to settle the question. CHP Canada supports a real referendum on electoral change, not an expensive and bogus survey composed of badly framed questions and confusing choices. We believe that the opinions of all Canadians should be represented in Parliament, which is not currently happening.

It appears that the Liberal promise to change the system before Election 2019 will likely be broken; Elections Canada has given some clear timelines, and the slow pace of the consultations so far make any change unlikely. An edict from the Government would speed up the process but, with the perception of conflict of interest, they would be very suspect of stacking the deck.

The process, which started out with so much promise, is looking like the same old cynical politics that many Canadians thought they got rid of when they elected Mr. Trudeau last year.

CHP Canada supports Mixed Member Proportional Representation because it is fairer than the current system. But, more than that, we desire honesty in government. Promises should not be made lightly for short-term political gain. They should be made wisely and kept faithfully. Confusing and disingenuous online surveys are no substitute.

Consistent integrity is what the Christian Heritage Party brings to politics — because we know that we are accountable to God for our promises. That essential component is missing from the Government of Canada.

Footnotes

¹ www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/the-problem-with-maryam-monsefs-contempt-for-metrics/

² mydemocracy.ca

³ jpolitics.ca/2016/12/06/rainbows-sparkles-ranked-ballot-mps-mock-electoral-reform-survey/

⁴ jpolitics.ca/2016/12/06/mydemocracy-ca-poses-privacy-risks-for-canadians-in-small-towns-professor/