

November 22, 2004

Paul Martin's 'Senate-in-waiting'

Prime Minister Paul Martin delivered one of those bogus statements last week which make politicians sound like they love something they actually hate.

Opposition Leader Steve Harper had asked whether Martin will appoint the winners of the special Senate election Albertans are holding today, alongside a provincial general election.

In other provinces the PM's Senate appointees are local loyal Liberals. But in Alberta the PM drags his feet appointing anyone, because since we began electing Senate nominees in 1989 it looks bad when he ignores democracy.

Albertans have turned one of the more pleasant prime ministerial duties into a public relations nightmare.

As a result half of Alberta's six seats have fallen vacant. One has been empty for two years. The situation is unique in Canada.

No, said Martin in answer to Harper, "I have long been an advocate of Senate reform. However, I do not believe that doing Senate reform piecemeal really would bring us the desired result."

This is the standard Liberal evasion. Senate reform is so terribly, terribly important we can't let the provinces start the process willy nilly. There must be a Master Federal Plan. We have to meet at Meech Lake and Reopen the Constitution. Not this decade or next, but maybe in the one after.

Martin reminds me of people who say that some day, when the time is exactly right, they will write a great novel, or stop drinking.

The reality is that the federal government will never reform the Senate, because a reformed Senate would weaken the powers of the Prime Minister.

Only the provinces have both the motive and the political power to force this issue, and Alberta is leading the way. It should continue with its elections, no matter what Martin says. Mulroney vowed he wouldn't appoint Senator-elect Stan Waters, and didn't, until he needed a favor from Alberta.

Martin no doubt meant it when he said he thinks Alberta's "piecemeal" approach to Senate reform would fail to create the "desired result."

What result does he desire? What would Paul Martin's Perfect Senate look like?

We don't know because he has never said. But we can guess.

The Perfect Paul Martin Senate would probably be "indirectly elected" (the standard euphemism) by an expert committee of incumbent senators, retired cabinet ministers and federal judges, feminists and academics, all named to the committee by the Prime Minister.

The Perfect Paul Martin Senate would probably be 50% women,

55% francophone, 25% senators of color, 10% specially-abled, 10% Aboriginal, 10% gay activists, and 99% Liberals.

Selections for the Perfect Paul Martin Senate would probably be rubber-stamped by a Commons committee dominated by Liberals and prevented from interviewing the candidates. (That's how we now staff the Supreme Court.)

The Perfect Paul Martin Senate would not check the power of the Prime Minister, and the control of Ontario and Quebec over the national government. But it would faithfully reflect "Canadian values," meaning Liberal values.

If Albertans really want to end such hypocrisy and nonsense, they will strike a blow for a truly reformed Senate by showing up in droves today and marking their ballots.

They will send Martin a message that if he wants to end western alienation and fix the democratic deficit in Parliament, it starts here.

Appoint the people we elected.

- Link Byfield

Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.

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