

November 29, 2004

The Senate can be reformed easily and effectively if Alberta makes it an issue

Well, Alberta's Senate election is over. Now the real fight begins--again.

I came fourth among the four winners with 236,000 votes. I was right behind Onoway farmer and former MP Cliff Breitzkreuz, and comfortably ahead of six other candidates.

First place went to Edmonton businesswoman Betty Unger with 308,000 votes, followed closely by Calgary-area farmer, Mr. Triple E himself, Bert Brown.

The question has been asked, what did the election achieve?

I think it has been answered by over two million marks on Alberta ballots. The mere fact that most voters chose to cast Senate ballots proves that they believe Parliament's upper house should be elected, not appointed by Paul Martin.

No reform could be more reasonable, nor do as much to change the way the federal government operates.

The main problem with Canada's system of government is that the prime minister has amassed far too much personal power. We have become an elected dictatorship.

All those who could and should be able to challenge his decisions--premiers, senators, judges, Liberal cabinet ministers and backbenchers--owe their positions or their revenues to his goodwill.

There are now so many appointed Liberals in the Senate even

Liberal senators publicly complain that it no longer functions.

The prime minister unilaterally decides fiscal policy, defence policy, social policy, foreign policy, and justice policy. His word is law. The thousand minions who staff his two offices (the PMO and PCO) face none of those power-balances which normally prevent constitutional democracies from descending into corrupt, ugly little tyrannies.

That's why the Chretien PMO could secretly run the sponsorship program which saw \$100 million stolen from the federal treasury. It's why we can't ditch Liberal boondoggles like the gun registry, which most Canadians now oppose.

If the Senate were independently elected, much of this problem would vanish overnight.

We don't even need the old Reform Party idea of provincial equality. We can do it with the regional equality which is in the Senate now. All we'd have to do is reduce the Atlantic from 30 senators to 24 (a fluke of history), so it has the same number as Quebec, Ontario and the West have always had.

If this regionally equal Senate were proportionately elected, and even if Canadians voted the same for the Senate as they did for the House of Commons, the Liberals would have lost control of the Senate in all of the last three elections.

I did the math. After this year's election, out of 99 senators (96 for the four regions and one each for the northern territories), today's Senate would consist of 40 Liberals, 28 Conservatives, 17 New Democrats, 12 Blocs, and two Greens.

More importantly, the previous two elections, which saw strong and abusive Chretien majorities in the Commons, would have produced similar Liberal minorities in the Senate.

Small wonder that Paul Martin has changed his mind about letting provinces name or elect senators, a promise Klein says he made to the premiers at last year's Grey Cup in Regina.

Martin's skating on thin political ice. The premiers--especially Ralph Klein--could break that ice by making this an issue.

Let's hope Klein does before Martin fills Alberta's vacant seats with three more Liberal flunkies.

You can suggest this to the premier by e-mailing him at premier@gov.ab.ca, or through his Web site, www.gov.ab.ca/premier.

- Link Byfield

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

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