

The Senate reform Canadians wanted

By *Senator Elaine McCoy* December 27, 2008

Now that Stephen Harper has filled 18 Senate vacancies, he can forge ahead with his goal of reforming the Senate itself. In the new year, we may well see the Conservatives reintroduce bills that will propose elections for future Senators and fixed eight-year terms.

But Harper should not presume to know what significant changes Canadians would like for their institutions without asking them first. He might be surprised at the response.

We know he has already ignored one consultative report on the issue. Last year, he asked Canadians what they thought of their government, and they told him. The 2007 Compas report that the Harper government itself commissioned ('Public consultations on Canada's Democratic Institutions and Practices: A Report for the Privy Council Office') provides in-depth consultations with a wide assortment of Canadians from across the country.

The report details Canadians' views on the House of Commons, the Senate, political parties and the electoral system in general.

What is most striking about the report, by and large, is that it is not the Senate that generates vehement and critical reviews from Canadians, but the House; and in particular, the negative and unconstructive partisan fighting amongst our MPs and political parties.

'Question Period,' with its petty bickering and bellowing, was routinely cited as an embarrassment. Canadians, the Compas report reveals, clearly want to see more cross-party co-operation and a more dignified exchange of ideas from their government.

When Canadians were queried on their views of the Senate, they were far more positive. Consultations show that Canadians believe it important for the Senate to continue to preserve and defend minority and regional interests, and work co-operatively across party lines. Participants also remarked on the more diverse face of the Senate compared to the House, including more women, aboriginal and other ethnic minorities.

The consultations also reveal that Canadians find the Senate a useful institution -- a watchdog even -- for safeguarding and fine-tuning legislation put forward by the government.

Admittedly, the report does demonstrate that a perceived lack of accountability in the Senate is a key concern. But this concern was expressed primarily in terms of a distrust of partisan politics -- particularly in regard to successive prime ministers' proclivity to stack the Senate with potential patronage appointments.

In the Compas poll -- to which respondents could answer 'yes' or 'no' -- a majority said they favoured an elected Senate. But sometimes the question (and the way it is phrased) determines the answer. What this poll was effectively asking Canadians was if they favour partisan elections rather than the current PMO patronage appointment system. It is no surprise that in this, and other such polls like it, the answer is almost always 'yes.'

But of course, there are more options. A more interesting and nuanced polling question might be: 'Would you like to see a Senate independent from partisan politics?' or 'Would you like to see a Senate independent from the PMO?'

If the consultations from the weighty Compas report are any indication, the overwhelming answer from Canadians would be 'yes' on both questions.

Harper's proposal for an elected Senate would simply reinforce the partisan bickering that Canadians want less, not more, of. We don't need, nor do Canadians want, a copy of the House -- which is what straightforward partisan elections for Senators would ensure.

Canadians want accountability in their Senate, and they deserve it, too. But let's discuss, intelligently, beyond yes-or-no polls, how this might be best achieved.

It might mean an appointment system from a cross-party committee federally, so that our Senate is selected in a non-partisan, co-operative manner from the outset; it might mean a consultative system with community leaders at the regional level; it might mean a selection process -- similar to how the Order of Canada is granted -- that ensures that a diverse swath of Senators is appointed from all walks of life, but who have reached the highest pinnacles in their field.

If Harper is to proceed with Senate reform, he needs to forgo his personal vision and heed, instead, what Canadians want from their fine institutions.

The country deserves no less.

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