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## Electing senators provincially is the first of two necessary federal reforms

Before Stephen Harper told the premiers last month that come hell or high water Canadians will soon start electing senators, almost nobody was interested.

Now politicians and pundits all over the country are writing about the Senate -- loudly.

Some say elections are a bad idea because they will change our system of federal government. Others say they're a bad idea because they won't change our system of government, except to make it even worse.

What hardly anyone talks about, however, is what the Senate is supposed to be doing.

In every federal system like Canada's, Parliament needs two houses: a "lower house" to represent the individual citizens who make up the nation, and an "upper house" to represent the provinces which make up the federation.

Section 22 of our 1867 Constitution states explicitly that senators represent provinces.

Unfortunately our senators don't really represent provinces, because the provinces don't appoint or elect them. They are chosen by the prime minister.

If they were chosen by the provinces -- either by provincial governments or in provincial elections -- they would actually do the job our constitution gives them.

"Alberta Senator" Tommy Banks would not be spearheading

Kyoto in the upper house, and "Alberta Senator" Grant Mitchell would not be complaining that Albertans are alienated because they hate Canada.

Second, provincially-elected senators would hold the government in the House of Commons more accountable than the Commons Opposition can. We wouldn't see things like the Sponsorship Program continuing unchallenged for years.

Third, they would do what our present senators do (and all they have ever done), which is to study national issues and tweak Commons legislation.

In federal systems far more successful than ours -- Germany, the U.S., Switzerland -- the upper house does all these jobs and more.

As I have written before, the real question is not whether senators should be elected, but who will run the elections.

If Ottawa does, the Senate will continue to represent the interests and priorities of federal parties, which are always centred in "vote-rich" Ontario and Quebec. To represent all provincial values and concerns in Parliament, therefore, senators should be elected in provincial elections and should run for provincial parties.

A provincially-elected Senate would soon cease to be a kind of echo-chamber of the House of Commons with more Liberals. It would think and act independently.

Because there are no strong ties between provincial parties, senators would have to sit in provincial and regional blocs. This would have a major psychological effect. No matter who they ran for, senators would be identified by their province, not their party.

And because senators would now have enormous authority to speak for their province, they would be expected to consult regularly with their home governments.

A Senate of this sort could develop over five to ten years without any constitutional change, and would solve one of the two worst things about Ottawa -- the dictatorial power of the government (meaning the prime minister and cabinet) over Parliament.

It would not solve the other huge problem, which is the power of the federal government to tax and spend in provincial areas of responsibility, from which all manner of evil irresponsibility flows.

That will require a constitutional amendment which is not yet even in sight.

But far better to solve one problem than none.

- Link Byfield

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*"Just Between Us" is a feature service of the Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.*