

Editorial ? Electoral reform: a dead issue?

We wonder how many Canadians will take the time to peruse the federal Liberals' latest tactic as the party attempts to carry out Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's promise that last year's federal election will be the last of its kind.

His promise was first made during the election campaign, when a clear issue was the fact that the Conservatives had won a majority government in 2011 with less than 40 per cent of the popular vote.

At that time, Trudeau obviously didn't know that his Liberals would accomplish the same feat, winning a similar majority with just 39 per cent of the popular vote.

However, the government did appoint an all-party committee with a mandate to study the various options, and last week it did suggest that a referendum be held on some form of proportional representation.

In our opinion, such a referendum would almost certainly produce a preference for the status quo once it became clear that with proportional representation at least some of the seats in the Commons would be occupied by MPs who had no local constituency.

Dissatisfaction with the committee's recommendation probably lay behind the government's latest tactic ? a lengthy online interactive survey on electoral reform.

Through a new online portal called MyDemocracy.ca, Canadians are being asked no fewer than 31 questions, none of which seeks opinions as to whether there should be a referendum on electoral reform. The deadline for responses is Dec. 30.

The Liberals describe the website MyDemocracy.ca as an ?innovative way to join the conversation on electoral reform,? and contends taking part in the survey will take ?only a few minutes.? Yet The Canadian Press found a paper printoff of the section was more than 30 pages long.

The survey, by Toronto-based Vox Pop Labs, asks respondents to rate their level of agreement to 20 ?propositions? labelled ?values.? The five-point scale ranges from ?strongly disagree? to ?strongly agree.?

One proposition states: ?A ballot should be easy to understand, even if it means voters have fewer options to express their preferences,? while another says: ?Voters should be able to express multiple preferences on the ballot, even if this means that it takes longer to count the ballots and announce the election result.?

A separate backgrounder, ?Democracy in Canada,? outlines some of the ways Canadians might cast their votes ? pick one candidate, rank them or choose multiple candidates without ranking them.

But a check of the website Monday confirmed that none of the 31 questions dealt with the possibility of a modified ?first past the post? election ? provision of a run-off election in any riding where the candidate who topped the polls received fewer than half the votes.

In all probability, this absence is a product of the parties' preferences. The Conservatives clearly like the existing system, whereas the Liberals would like preferential ballots and the NDP and Green parties would prefer proportional representation.

The real problem with the runoff alternative is that while ensuring that all MPs were preferred by a majority of their constituents, it wouldn't necessarily benefit any party.

Assuming that the runoffs took place 30 days after the general election, voters would all know the results and might well behave in much the same way as they do in byelections, tending to vote against the party in power.

Our suggestion would be that the concept be tested in the 2019 election, with runoffs only in ridings where the winner had under 40 per cent of the total votes. If the system won general approval, the long-term objective would be to have all those elected obtain the support of at least half the voters.