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What could have been

EDITORIAL

ONE THING CANADIANS will never learn is what it really was that made Justin Trudeau fail to live up to one of his key promises four years ago in the 2015 federal election campaign.

Back then, he didn't mince words, promising that Canadians had witnessed their last ?first past the post? election, in which some candidates won seats in the House of Commons when most of the voters in their riding preferred someone else.

No one expected the newly elected Liberal government to opt for pure proportional representation, with each party being awarded seats on the basis of their share of the popular vote. Among other things, that would presumably have meant an end to our constituency system, in which we vote for local candidates rather than the party they represent. More importantly, it would have meant the election of minority governments unless one party got more than 50 per cent of the votes, something unheard of in recent years when parties have won majorities with less than 40 per cent of the popular vote.

Another option that was apparently considered but rejected was the introduction of preferential voting, with voters being asked to rank all the local candidates. In the case of Dufferin-Caledon riding, that would likely have meant ranking all six candidates, most of whom were not well known in the riding.

In this election, the Conservatives and Liberals having been preferred by only about one in three voters, we'll see a House of Commons in which most of the MPs were not favoured by a majority of their constituents.

The one option that apparently wasn't even considered by Trudeau & Co. was runoff elections in any riding where the winner got less than half the votes.

We don't know, but suspect that it was only in Alberta and Saskatchewan that most, if not all, the candidates did obtain majorities.

Even in Dufferin-Caledon, the decisive win by Conservative candidate Kyle Seeback fell short of an absolute majority. While he received 28,729 votes in the election night count, the other five candidates polled more than 38,000 votes.

Clearly, no one knows what would have happened had the election law been changed to require run-offs between the top two candidates in every riding where the leading candidates didn't get a majority.

However, in this particular election it appears that a runoff in Dufferin-Caledon would have produced a close race between Mr. Seeback and Liberal candidate Michele Fisher, who wound up in second place with 22,330 votes or 32.9 per cent of the overall count (ironically almost exactly the Liberals' share of the nationwide popular vote).

Although we'll never know what would have happened with nation-wide runoffs, a strong clue came in the form of polling which indicated that most of the Canadians who said they had voted for an NDP, Green or Bloc Québecois candidate gave the Liberal candidate as their second preference, while only six per cent of those polled gave second place to the Tory candidate.

In the cicumstances, it will be interesting to see whether the Liberals now will propose some electoral reforms knowing they would likely get some opposition support for the move.

Of course, much would depend on what happens both in the Commons and within the Conservative Party, which this time around was alone (save for the People's Party) in opposing the carbon tax without proposing a credible alternative means of battling climate change.

Although runoffs this time would likely have produced a Liberal majority, that would not have been the case if the Conservatives had decided to have a platform that was more attractive to younger voters and had the sort of appeal garnered by the Progressive Conservatives federally under Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney and in Ontario under Bill Davis, all of whom were basically centrists who saw no need for platforms aimed at appealing to the party's base.

If the next election sees all the national parties appealing to uncomitted, middle-of-the-road Canadians, runoffs would simply ensure than in each riding the winner would have enjoyed the support of a majority of those casting ballots.