

Bill Rea ? Keep the Senate as it is

At my advanced age, and after almost 30 years in this business, I'm happy to report there are still things that surprise me. As you have undoubtedly noticed, we have been running weekly opinion polls in the Citizen for the last couple of years. These are not formal polls, on the level of Gallup or Ipsos Reid, and they aren't meant to be. They are by no means to be taken as scientific reflections of public opinion (I would have no idea how to go about creating such a poll). They are simply reflections of the people who oblige us by responding on the Citizen's Website (www.caledoncitizen.com). And the more, the merrier. Last week's question, to refresh your memory, was "Do you think the Canadian Senate should be abolished?" It is a fact that I thought up that question all by myself, and the editors of a couple of other community newspapers affiliated with the Citizen picked it up. I guess it just goes to show that these editors know quality when they see it, and they know me. The question was prompted by the recent scandals involving the Upper House of Canada's Parliament, particularly those suggesting that some members may have been a bit too enthusiastic when it comes to bellying up to the proverbial trough. I chose the question because I thought it was topical, and I also figured that given the latest controversy, there would be quite a call to close the Red Chamber down, for good. Thus I was surprised last Monday morning when I went through the process of checking the results of the poll, and found that roughly 80 per cent were opposed to abolishing the Senate. Although I didn't have any preconceived notions on what the numbers would show, those results did catch me a little off guard. I checked the results of the same poll question in the King Weekly Sentinel, which serves neighbouring King Township, and learned that keeping the Senate had the support of 43 per cent of respondents. Those figures were a little less surprising. The results gathered by the Orangeville Citizen were radically different, and actually not at all surprising. They reported 79 per cent of those responding want to see the Senate tossed. People in the Orangeville office were just about as puzzled at the results as I was. I even received a phone call from up north to verify that I had checked the results carefully. I had, and I had a simple explanation for the variance in the numbers. "I guess people in Caledon are smarter," I told him, "because I frankly think getting rid of the Senate is a stupid idea." By the way, remember where you read that Caledon people are smarter. Having studied the workings of government through the public education system (some form of training in that regard was there in my day, for the benefit of those who were interested), followed by three years in university lecture halls supposedly learning about some of the deep thinking involved in politics, and then enhanced by almost three decades of actually watching some of these practitioners at work, I will admit my mind has changed about the Canadian Senate. There were years when I had a dreadful time figuring out what the point was of having such a body. I would wonder who these people report to. In any other political office, the holder has constituents. But our form of government in Canada has been running a federal union here for going on 150 years. It's based on institutions that were presumably established by guys who knew what they were doing. Add to that the fact that we got along okay for more than 100 years without even a written constitution. So I think that a person's position on Senate abolition, or even reform, is likely to change if they start considering why it was created in the first place. The line we always hear is it's supposed to be a chamber of "sober second thought" on legislation, and someone is going to have to do a lot of talking before they'll sell me on what's wrong with that. And senators have the ability to initiate and amend legislation. About 20 years ago, there was talk that the Senate, which was dominated by Liberals at the time, might use their influence and numbers in the Upper House to block the implementation of the GST. Now whatever one may have thought about the GST (and considering that governments have changed over the years and the GST is still here, I think we can safely say that both Liberals and Conservatives are fans of it), the fact is the duly-elected government of Brian Mulroney came up with GST, and they had the mandate to bring it in. That is the closest example I can think of in which senators might have abused their position. Beyond that, I think it's a pretty safe bet that senators generally know their place. Despite cynical comments, that are very easy to make about almost anyone, I don't think senators are a bunch of dummies. They know they are not elected, thus they know they have very limited business getting in the way of the elected members of the House of Commons. So that leads to the question of why do we have a Senate. My response is it's a legislative body that reflects the regional diversity of this country, and that is important. There is lots of wealth,

along with vocal clout in Alberta. But in terms of population, the numbers are lacking. There's got to be some mechanism to get their regional voice heard in Ottawa.

There are those who say Senators should be elected, and I will grant there is some merit to the idea, along with a lot of flaws.

In our Parliamentary democracy, it's the elected members of the House of Commons (the prime minister being one of them) who are supposed to run things, and they do, largely because they are the only elected game in town. But if we have senators with electoral mandates from constituents hanging around, they are going to insist, with lots of justification, on having a certain amount of clout. Then who heads our government? The prime minister derives his authority from his control of the Commons. If we have an elected Senate, who becomes our main guy on the world stage?

Now that's not to say there isn't room for improvement in the way the Senate is run. While I think it's important to carry on with it being an appointed body, there are some adjustments that might work. Limiting the length of terms is probably a good step in the right direction, be it six, eight, 10 or whatever number of years. In that event, there can be no reappointments. The last thing this country needs is to have a bunch of senators approaching the end of their terms trying to butter-up the PM.

Besides, having an appointed Senate means there's a chance that you or, more importantly, I will get an appointment one of these days. I have something to look forward to

