

Bill Rea ? NDP won't toss Senate

We're going to have a federal election this year.

Anyone who doubts that should consider the antics of the various parties.

I don't get much chance to watch TV. My viewing habits are restricted mainly to baseball, since hockey is off the list as of Monday. But I have been watching enough of the tube to see the Conservative attack ads aimed at Justin Trudeau, commenting that he's not ready for the job he seeks, namely that of Prime Minister. Stephen Harper and company are running these ads because they know a campaign is coming and they want to go on the offensive fast.

What's another indication that an election is in the offing? We're starting to hear high-sounding promises that will never come to reality. The problem is these promises might sucker in voters who don't realize their fulfillment is next to impossible. There's really nothing wrong with that. Part the game, if you're part of a political party heading into an election, is to try and attract votes, and hope people don't ask too many questions over the stupid promises.

This all occurred to me last Thursday as I read in the Toronto Star that NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair is planning to make abolition of the Canadian Senate an election issue.

?I'm going to work non-stop? on this, the Star quoted him as saying, as if he's going to have nothing else on his plate, should he form the next government.

Again, there's nothing wrong with that. New Democrats have never been fans of the Senate, so their calls for its abolition is nothing new, and it is also consistent.

And considering all the troubles that have been plaguing the Senate of late, I think it's a safe bet that it would attract votes.

The problem is there is no way the Senate is going to be abolished by electing an NDP government. In fact, it's not going to be abolished any time soon.

Such a move would require an amendment to the Canadian Constitution, and would require a certain amount of support from the provincial governments, and I don't think that support is there.

The Star story also cited Mulcair as stating that the public is demanding the Senate be scrapped. I don't believe that, despite what's been going on lately, but that's another matter.

Harper has been calling for an elected Senate, and failing that, for it to be scrapped. But I think he's done some thinking and realized that the abolition option is simply not going to happen (I could have told him that).

Trudeau, from what I glean from the Star article, has nothing really constructive to suggest on the matter. He suggested (accurately, I think) that Mulcair is trying to attract votes with impossible promises, but apart from suggestions that changes are needed to the Senate, there wasn't much there.

In the interest of fairness, the Star story devoted a whole paragraph (actually the last paragraph) to Green Party Leader Elizabeth May. She was quoted as saying she favours an elected Senate with a lot more accountability, but she also expressed a note of realism.

?Everything about that question is a perfect political football for people who don't want to get anything done because it will require opening up the Constitution,? she was quoted as saying.

Actually, I think she summed up the whole situation rather well.

I have written about the Senate many times, so a lot of you out there are probably familiar with my position.

I think we need a Senate in Canada because we need a legislative body that reflects the regional differences in this country.

Representation by population (commonly known as rep by pop) has its place, and that's what is sort of aimed for in the make-up of the House of Commons. But the various geographic areas of our land have to be heard too, and the Senate helps that.

Having the elected Senate that Harper and May would like to see would open up a big proverbial can of worms. How often would Senate elections be held? Would senators represent individual ridings? Who would head the government of this country? Harper is the current head of government because he leads the party with the most seats in the House. Who forms the government if the Senate suddenly has a bunch of elected members demanding a say in it? If there are fewer elected senators than there are elected members of the House, would they not have a case to demand more authority? Could we eventually see a move to abolish the House of Commons?

Have Harper and May thought those issues through? Something makes me doubt it.

And do Canadians really want another level of elected officials spread across the national scene. I have always been a firm believer in democracy, and I am also one who has no time for people who argue that we have too many people holding elected office. But it is possible to be over-represented. I can see a constituent having some sort of problem, with their MP and Senator getting into

personal squabbles over how to deal with it. If they get into heated personal fighting (and since they would be human, I think that would be a frequent occurrence), I fear the problem would become a secondary concern.

Considering the mood out there among Canadians these days, I can see a lot of merit in some kind of Senate reform. There is a very evident sense of entitlement that exists among some of the members of the Red Chamber, but is it also not true that there are people in just about every setting who will try to take all they can get away with? The solution is to tighten the rules, not abolish the body. In any other setting, if it's found that too many people are bending the rules, the usual response is to make it tougher on them. If a sports team is caught flouting the rules too often, you don't ban the game. You adjust the regulations.

There are other changes that might work.

For example, a senator can hold his or her office until they are 75. Change that to a set number of years, maybe six, maybe 10, maybe whatever, with no extensions. That would have the advantage of not having sitting senators trying to suck up to the government of the day, because there wouldn't be that much for them to gain. And it would mean regular new blood would be joining the ranks.

The Senate, as we have all been told for years, is supposed to be a chamber of 'sober second thought' on legislation.

Maybe Mulcair's idea to abolish the Senate needs some 'sober second thought'.

If the electorate comes to realize he won't be able to deliver on that promise (and he won't), then it's not going to attract many votes

