

Claire Hoy ? ?Non-partisanship?? Ridiculous

The thing to remember about Canada's Senate is that it was never meant to be anything but a haven for the elite. When Sir John A. Macdonald orchestrated what he called a body for 'sober second thought' ? somewhat ironic given Macdonald's serial lack of sobriety ? he made it clear that the idea was to keep check on the 'democratic excesses' of the elected House of Commons.

He and his fellow Fathers of Confederation didn't want the plebes getting too uppity, don't you know. Which is why, at the time, a senator had to be worth at least \$4,000 before being qualified to sit in the Red Chamber. Doesn't sound like much now. But back in 1867 it was an enormous sum, specifically designed to keep the riff-raff out of the running. Lord Dufferin, Canada's third governor-general, described the Senate as 'an absurdly effete body ? nothing but a political infirmary and a bribery fund.'

Not much has changed, alas, despite 132 of virtually unbroken efforts to 'reform' the place. The latest attempt comes from Trudeau The Younger ? Justin to the uninitiated ? who, without so much as a how-de-do to his 32 Liberal senators ? announced they were no longer members of his caucus and, according to him, 'There are no more Liberal senators.'

'The Senate must be non-partisan, composed merely of thoughtful individuals ? independent from any particular political brand,' he said.

This garnered Trudeau considerable media coverage and underscores the fact that most Canadians ? even those, like me, who think the Senate has a legitimate role to play ? are not happy with the status quo. Trudeau's move may pass muster as great gambit in a high school debating club, but it really makes little practical sense and doesn't advance the issue of genuine Senate reform.

For starters, there are Liberal senators. They aren't in the Liberal caucus any more, but they are Liberals ? and most of them have made that clear ? having already formed their own 'Liberal Senate caucus' independent of the Commons Liberal caucus. Trudeau has the power to decide who sits in his caucus, but even he, despite his omnipotent lineage, does not have the power to turn lifelong Liberals into something they are not.

Worse, his grand notion of 'reform' is to set up a body of important people ? read 'elites,' the same haughty approach Sir John A. had at the beginning, when only the rich and powerful were deemed worthy ? to decide who sits in the Senate. His plan would replace prime ministerial appointment power with a non-elected, unaccountable body choosing non-elected, unaccountable senators. Hard to see how that's more democratic than what we have. At least now ? as we've seen with Mike Duffy, et al ? prime ministers get the heat when things go wrong. Under Trudeau's scheme, nobody would bear responsibility.

Another thing. This notion of 'non-partisanship' is, I humbly submit, totally absurd. Nobody is non-partisan. Nobody. Sure, people are partisan about different things, not necessarily a particular political party, but, with the possible exception of robots, everybody is partisan to something.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has, as you likely know, referred several questions dealing with Senate reform to the Supreme Court and, perhaps, when they reply things may become clearer.

But don't count on wholesale reform, not under our current constitution, where it would take at least seven provinces and the federal government ? and the Senate itself ? (and for some things, all 10 provinces) ? to agree to change. Not going to happen. Ever. Which is why NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair's campaign to nuke the Senate is so disingenuous.

Harper has been criticized for promising Senate reform then larding it up with Tories. Fair enough. Remember though, that he first tried several times to bring in various reforms and was blocked each time by the opposition parties. So here we sit.

Harper also takes heat for being authoritarian. What about Trudeau? He didn't discuss his plan with anybody. No caucus debate. No conversations with the senators, many of whom have toiled loyally for the party since long before he was born. And suddenly, to paraphrase a famous campaign quote from his late father, he told the Liberal senators 'Zap! You're frozen out.'

Trudeau's real reason, alas, is obvious. The general audit of the Senate is due soon and there are bound to be plenty of juicy headlines. So he hopes that when Liberal Senators are found to have been loosey-goosey with public spending he'll be able to say 'Hey, they aren't Liberals. They're independent.'

Well, as the old saying goes, if it looks like a Grit, and walks like a Grit, and talks like a Grit, it is a Grit.'

As B.C. Liberal Senator Mobina Jaffer responded, 'I'm still a Liberal senator, not independent. I'm still a Liberal. I've always been a Liberal. I've been a Liberal for 38 years.'

We may question her judgment, but that's another issue.

