

Editorial ? How to get electoral reform

It should be clear that our new federal government has a lot to deal with these days.

There is one item on the agenda that has not drawn a lot of attention yet, but it will, especially since it will have a lot of impact on the way this democracy of ours functions.

There was some mention during last fall's federal campaign that the 2015 election was going to be the last one with the current system, commonly known as 'first past the post.' While it did come up, it wasn't one of the main planks of the Liberal platform. No matter, it's a matter that has been a concern for some, and there are calls to have it addressed.

Late last month, there were reports that the Liberals were intending to use their majority in the House of Commons to ram changes through, without reference to the electorate. There have been charges that the Liberals are being arrogant in their approach.

Assuming the Trudeau Liberals carry through on what's been suggested, it can be demonstrated that it would be nothing new. One of the great disadvantages of electing majority governments, at either the federal or provincial level, is they sometimes get the idea that they have been granted a blank cheque to do just about anything they please.

Think of the Ontario government's plan to sell shares of Hydro One. Was that a major issue in the 2014 election? It was not.

There have been calls for a referendum on this matter. We think it's a safe bet we're not going to see one. Why won't the government hold a referendum? Premier Kathleen Wynne doesn't have to.

Think back some 28 years. The Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney was returned to another majority. During that memorable campaign, which was dominated by the issue of free trade with the United States, there was no mention of bringing in a sales tax at the federal level. Yet we got one, over very loud protests. It was called the Goods and Services Tax (GST).

Do you recall a referendum on that issue? Of course not. Why? The government of the day didn't have to.

In 1995, Ontario voters gave Mike Harris and his Progressive Conservatives a majority. One of the points the Tories had mentioned during the campaign was plans to hold referendums.

But late in 1996, hints were dropping that the Tories were planning to amalgamate the six municipalities that made up the Metro level of government into one city in Toronto, commonly referred to as a 'megacity.' And when the necessary legislation was revealed, it was made clear that there would be no referendum.

Opponents to the plan organized their own referendum, led by such community activists as former Toronto mayor John Sewell and Kathleen Wynne (yes, that Kathleen Wynne). In the end, 76.1 per cent of the Toronto residents who participated in the referendum told the Harris government to drop the idea. Harris didn't have to because he had a majority.

Thus, it's clear that we have very little reason to hope that there will be a referendum if and when Trudeau and company come up with their plans for electoral reform. That's simply the way things have gone for the last 150 years or so.

But something else that should be discussed is the simple fact that government can do things like this. Does that not point to a need for some sort of reform in the ways governments are elected in this system of ours?

How to achieve that is a major question.

The Trudeau government can come up with any idea it likes and push it through Parliament.

One disadvantage to holding a referendum is would it be a vote on reform in question, or an opinion poll on how the government is governing? (Remember the Charlottetown Accord referendum of October 1992, which degenerated to a poll on the Mulroney government).

Ontario voters were given the chance to vote on a proposal for reform, called 'mixed-member proportional representation.' That was tacked on as a referendum question on the ballots in the 2007 general election. The incumbent government of Dalton McGuinty wisely just put the question on the ballot, and took no definite stand on the issue. For that matter, no one did. Not surprisingly, the proposed reform was rejected.

If we're going to have electoral reform that we can all live with and embrace, there's going to have to be as faction that comes up with a workable idea and get it before the voters, through a referendum, complete with explanations as to how it would work, and promotion of the advantages. Opponents would be able to make their own case to the contrary.

It could be argued that electoral reform is too important to leave up to government.