

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? A ?reform? we can do without

Asked what qualities a politician required, Winston Churchill said this:

?The ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen.?

Which brings us, of course, to our new prime minister-designate, Justin Trudeau.

During the campaign ? and immediately after ? he promised it would be the last time Canadians voted via our traditional first-past-the-post system.

Easy to say. Difficult to do.

Certain lobby groups have been complaining for years that our system is patently unfair. In some ways it is. Trudeau, for example, won just 40 per cent of the vote ? which means 60 percent voted for somebody else ? yet he commands a majority of seats in the Commons.

At first blush, that seems undemocratic.

There are several other systems in the world but, alas, they too all have their shortcomings and, for me anyway, tend to be even less democratic than our current system.

That's probably why the general public ? as opposed to special interest groups who see a change as benefiting them, rather than making democracy better ? have said ?no thanks? when asked their opinions in Ontario, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island. Leave well enough alone, it seems.

The big problem with other systems, even preferential ballots where you list your favourites in order of preference, is that the post-election routine often involves a bunch of people sitting around a room and bargaining for their position, none of it in public. Other systems inevitably result in perennial minority governments. People who adore big government really like that, of course, since it gives minor parties much more clout in Parliament than the electorate meant to give them, a reality which doesn't strike me as very democratic.

Many countries have systems where some politicians are elected directly and others from a party slate. That means that once the votes are counted, party officials decide who will ?represent? you in their legislative body, a system which often means actually going without a government for weeks and even months while the political horse trading goes on behind closed doors.

Given our recent election results, it is highly unlikely Trudeau would have the strong majority he will have upon his formal swearing-in. Do you really think that he ? and his party ? want to trade that off for a system which makes it almost impossible to win majorities? I don't.

Here's another thing. Those clamouring for electoral ?reform? ? the inference being changing it would make it better ? haven't been persuasive in arguing that change would be better for everybody, not just for their particular groups.

Clearly, after a decade under Stephen Harper, voters wanted a change. For much of the campaign Trudeau's Liberals and Thomas Mulcair's NDP were neck-in-neck in the polls because voters hadn't decided a)- which of the two opposition parties they would prefer and/or b)- which of the two they felt had the best chance of beating the Tories. In the end, obviously, more opted for the Liberals. Hence, the Liberal majority and the NDP collapse.

The point is this. Not only in this election, but in all the previous elections that I can recall, our current system allowed the public to get what they wanted. Isn't that the point of elections?

It happened in 1979 when Justin's father Pierre Trudeau was widely disliked. People were so mad at him then that they gave Joe Clark, of all people, a minority.

Clark, of course, went on to squander it and allow Trudeau to regain a majority, but that speaks to Clark's political stupidity, not to our system.

At the end of Brian Mulroney's run, again the public was clamouring to throw the rascal out ? even though he'd left on his own accord, leaving Kim Campbell to defend the impossible. Once again, the public got what it wanted. Then, after years of Jean Chr tien, followed by Paul Martin, and all the scandals which had soured the public on the Liberals, voters astutely used their votes to toss the bums out and put the Tories in. Now it's come full circle, and it's the Liberal turn to open with impossible expectations and eventually disappoint everybody.

In short, Trudeau should find a way to worm out of this promise ? heaven knows he has enough other promises to make or break and keep him busy.

He'd be a damn fool to fall for the ?reform? shtick. And he's obviously not a fool.

The best approach, if he must persist, is to ask the public in a referendum and live by the results. That's the democratic way. And it

can get him off the hook at the same time.

Anyway, a voting system is too fundamental simply to change by fiat. It's not really his decision to make.

