

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Mandatory voting no solution

Among a group of ideas recently dispatched to grassroots Liberals across the country is the old chestnut about what is called compulsory voting.

The argument is that since 22 countries already practise it ? although only 10 of those actually enforce it ? and with voter turnout on a steady downhill trend, the time has come for Canada to adopt the system.

In the last federal election, for example, about 60 per cent of eligible voters trudged off to the polls. That means, of course, that 40 per cent of the electorate didn't vote.

The turnouts for provincial ? and especially municipal ? elections is even worse.

So it follows, according to mandatory voting advocates, that if people aren't going to exercise their ?democratic? right to vote then we should force them to.

Doesn't sound very ?democratic? to me. Quite the opposite.

In a free society such as ours, we have all sorts of rights. To be sure, they aren't unlimited, but we do have say, the right to free speech (as long as we don't libel or slander someone.) But the flip side of these rights is the ?right? not to exercise the right.

Yes, we have free speech, but that doesn't mean we all have to head out to the nearest soap box and burst into political orations.

Voting, to me, is in the same category.

I believe people should vote. We actually have a duty to vote. Millions have lost their lives fighting to keep that right ? and other rights ? that we enjoy, and it's hardly a great burden once every few years to lurch off to your nearby polling station and mark an ?X? beside your choice.

When I was raising my five children, I always stressed the idea that voting is a privilege not enjoyed by many millions of people around the world, so it's the least you can do. Doesn't matter who you vote for. Just get out there and vote.

Since I've been old enough to vote ? which is a longer time than I care to think about ? I have never, ever missed the chance to vote, although I dare say my record of voting for winners is woefully inadequate.

Still, whether my choice wins or loses, I feel that I've done my duty and, in our representative system, the winners represent everybody, not just those who voted for them.

Still, there are many who argue that mandatory voting is a good thing. For sure, it will raise voter turnout. But this reason to take away the democratic right to choose, i.e. to choose not to vote, doesn't cut it with me. If a 60 per cent turnout ? or even less ? is somehow bad for democracy, then how come you are guaranteed a ?win? with 50 per cent plus one? Shouldn't that number be higher too if the idea is that even 60 per cent is not representative of the public will?

In a piece a few years back in the Canadian Parliamentary Review, former Liberal MP and senator (since forced to resign in disgrace) Mac Harb argued strongly for mandatory voting, quoting, among others, then Chief Electoral Officer Jean-Pierre Kingsley as saying, ?The right to vote is only meaningful when you use it.?

Nonsense. Would they also argue that the right of free speech or freedom of religion ? or all the other rights we enjoy ? don't mean anything unless you use them? The fact we have these rights is what is meaningful, not whether or not you use them at any particular time.

In her Sunday Star column this week, journalist Susan Delacourt also picks up the cudgels in favour of mandatory voting, citing the downward trend of voter turnout as the compelling argument in their favour.

She also cites ?the robocalls debacle, in which two judges have now issued rulings about a widespread voter-suppression scheme in 2011 (as) maybe the strongest argument in favour of mandatory voting.?

Ah, no. For starters, the robocall scheme wasn't particularly widespread at all, but confined to a few ridings. It's also illegal, as it should be, and perpetrators have been penalized for it. And even with mandatory voting, that wouldn't have stopped these people from spreading false information to voters about where they had to go to cast their votes.

Still, it's one of those interesting ? at least to those of us who enjoy politics ? debates which keep popping up.

But the bottom line, to me at least, is that mandatory voting is simply not democratic.

Yes, you need a licence to drive a car. But we don't make you drive a car, do we? We give you free choice. That's how it works.

