

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Mulcair can't do it, and he knows it

Among several things that have distinguished the NDP from both the Tories and the Liberals over the years is their claim that, unlike the two old-line parties, they stand on principle rather than cheap political expediency.

Apparently current NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair didn't get the memo.

In his current campaign to make crass political hay out of the ongoing Senate dispute, Mulcair is knowingly and with malice aforethought ? as lawyers and judges like to say ? making claims that he absolutely knows cannot be fulfilled, even if he did become prime minister after the next election.

Mulcair says if he's elected he'll disband the Senate.

No, he won't. Under our current constitutional rules, he'd have a better chance of convincing Prime Minister Stephen Harper to cross the floor and join the NDP than he has of fulfilling his pledge to make the Senate disappear.

It is true that the NDP has long argued that the Senate should be abolished. You can agree with that position or not. At the moment, given all the negative publicity over the Senate spending kerfuffle, it's safe to say that most Canadians are applauding the notion. But part of the reason for that, I suspect, is that even though the Senate actually does a lot of useful work ? and is populated by some pretty successful and distinguished Canadians ? it's kind of like the Rodney Dangerfield of Canadian politics, in that it ?don't get much respect.? A good part of the reason



for that is that the media essentially ignores the Senate except when there is a scandal. But there you have it.

It should also be pointed out that the much-publicized audit set taxpayers back some \$24 million and discovered questionable Senate spending of less than \$1 million. Something is wrong with this picture. For one thing, why did the audit cost so much ? the auditor-general and his staff already are on the public payroll, did they really have to bring in outside high-priced help and work nights and weekends? Was there really an urgency to this?

What's more, even if the auditor's claim that \$1 million was misspent ? a claim many Senators are disputing, some with good cause ? it's still only about one-quarter of the almost \$4 million that Mulcair's own party misspent by setting up illegal satellite offices and using money meant for work in Ottawa and not outside the Capital.

Meanwhile, back at Senate abolition, the Supreme Court has already ruled some time ago that abolition would require not only federal approval but approval of ALL the provinces. That ain't happening.

Indeed, much to his credit, Maclean's Magazine journalist Aaron Wherry did what other national journalists should have done and actually contacted every province to ask what their position is on Senate abolition.

From Queen's Park, a statement from Premier Kathleen Wynne's office said that ?while abuse of taxpayer's dollars is unacceptable? rather ironic coming from this particular government ? they ?believe the Senate plays a valuable role.?

At a news conference last week, Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard ? the man leading Mulcair's home province ? said, ?Quebec is and always will be against the abolition of the Senate. It is in Quebec's interest?.

And so it goes. British Columbia says they're open to debate on everything about the Senate. Alberta's newly elected NDP government fobbed the issue off on Ottawa. Saskatchewan's Brad Wall repeats his long-standing position of abolition. So too does Manitoba. But New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and P.E.I. are all keen to keep the ?regional balance? provided by the Senate so that, being smaller provinces, they retain their voice in Ottawa.

The point is, you couldn't possibly get 10 pro-vin-cial premiers to agree on anything, let alone something as politically charged as abolishing the Senate, and Mulcair knows that full well.

He could argue that the NDP has always wanted abolition, but he might also acknowledge that, particularly following the Supreme Court mandate requiring universal consent, it's virtually impossible regardless of how much he would like to see it happen. Harper, of course, has tried various means of reforming the Senate since he's become prime minister and has been consistently blocked in his efforts by the opposition parties and the Senate itself.

While people like to think that Harper has turned the Senate into a 'partisan forum,' it was set up as a partisan forum in 1867 and has been ever thus. Who do people think got the first Senate appointments following Canada's formation in 1867? They weren't just random people picked from each province. They were absolute political partisans, one and all. If anything, Harper has actually broken the mould and appointed a few who aren't lifelong Tories for which, ironically, he's taken heat from his own party. The truth is, like it or not, we're stuck with the damn thing. We may be able to make minor changes. But abolition? Not a chance.