

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? ?Reform? will leave Senate as it is

George Orwell, who had a way with words, described political language as something ?designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.?

Which brings, as you may have guessed, to the new Liberal government's so-called Senate ?reform? package, a ?reform? which essentially leaves things pretty much as they were, other than the fact that the vacancies will be filled with Liberals now instead of Tories.

Where to begin?

Well, let's start with Democratic Reform Minister Maryam Monsef's absurd claim that her government will make the place ?non-partisan,? which is what the Fathers of Confederation meant it to be.

Monsef needs to read her history. The Senate was never ? ever ?designed to be non-partisan. Quite the opposite. It was, in fact, a sop to the Maritime Provinces to bring them on board with Ontario and Quebec (then Upper and Lower Canada) because they were worried that with fewer seats in the Commons they would have no power to exercise their views. And so the politicians of that day devised a plan whereby Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (P.E.I. didn't buy in until later) would have a disproportionate number of seats in the Senate as a balance against their smaller numbers in the Commons.

And there was no doubt that it was to be an appointed body ? our country founders made it clear they couldn't really leave the plebes with the job of actually electing people for heaven's sake.

Whatever you may think of the Senate as constituted, the fact is, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick wouldn't have signed on and Canada as we know it would not have come into being in 1867. Period. Full stop.

During the recent election campaign, now Prime Minister Justin Trudeau argued that Canadians want ?real change in the Senate,? something he defined as removing partisanship and patronage. Good luck with that.

Trudeau recognized ? as those parroting the easy slogan about getting rid of the Senate apparently don't ? that abolishing the place is virtually impossible. To do so would require the approval from the Commons, the Senate itself and all 10 provinces, and would mean re-opening our seriously flawed constitution (the proud legacy of Justin's late father Pierre, incidentally) a move which, as the Supreme Court has decreed, would allow every province to rush forward with their pet projects for constitutional change and would essentially bring everything to a standstill.

So now that he's elected, we discover that Trudeau's idea of ?real Senate reform? is ? oh, the excitement of it all ? to set up ?non-partisan? committees of worthy citizens (read the usual liberal elites) to recommend a list of potential appointments to him (but, as always, he'll have the final word) in secret.

According to Monsef ? who really does need to study up on her file ? this is unprecedented. Ah no, it's not. In Britain, the House of Lords does the same thing, and there is precious little evidence that it makes it any less partisan than it has always been.

The whole notion of ?non-partisan? in politics is a non sequitur, akin to the idea of finding a completely ?objective? journalist. There ain't no such animal.

So what, pray tell, has changed from Trudeau's plan to the system operated by Harper and all the prime ministers before him?

Nothing, apart from an ?appearance? of change.

Previous prime ministers didn't actually go out and track down potential senators. They had people doing it for them. Yes, it was all secret, leading to complaints by the now-governing Liberals that the system must be more transparent.

So will their new system be more transparent? No. The so-called non-partisan committee will submit a list of five potential senators for each opening ? none of which is open to the public ? and, again in secret, the prime minister will choose ? or opt not to choose ? from that list.

It won't become public until the new senator is chosen, exactly the way it has always been. Nothing new. And unworthy of the Liberal-friendly headlines trumpeting ?Senate reform.?

What Trudeau could do, if he really wanted change, is accept the Alberta model of holding unofficial province-wide Senate ?elections? and appointing the winner, which is what both Harper and Brian Mulroney did, but not Jean Chrétien or Paul Martin, Liberals both. But he won't do that because he can't control the outcome and make sure a like-minded ?non-partisan? gets the job. Having watched the Senate for decades ? and written a best-selling book on it, appropriately titled ?Nice Work? ? I don't favour abolition, even if it were possible, which ? again, thanks to Trudeau the Elder ? it isn't.

Despite obvious shortcomings, the Senate does perform much valuable service in improving flawed legislation.

Fact is, we're stuck with it. No amount of phony political rhetoric is changing that.

