

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Some absurd fear-mongering

Leading up to the last election, my neighbours received a voting information card in the mail intended for the people they bought the house from three years earlier.

It would have been easy for them to take the card over to the nearest polling booth ? just a block and a-half away ? and vote, then return later and vote again using their proper forms.

They didn't do it, but the point is that given the mobility of voters these days, those voter information cards are notoriously inaccurate, which is one reason why the federal Tories brought in what they call the Fair Elections Act, which requires voters to produce more reliable identification.

To nobody's surprise, the usual advocacy groups ? who never read any Tory legislation without detecting a plot in it ? are screaming blue murder that the new law will prevent ?tens of thousands? of Canadians from being able to vote in the next election.

There is no evidence ? none at all ? to support this absurd claim, but that doesn't stop it from being made over and over ? and repeated in media reports ? and it is ostensibly the reason that the perpetually alarmist left-wing Council of Canadians has joined with the Canadian Federation of Students in a court case designed to toss out the new law or at least order an emergency injunction against it.

Both sides presented their arguments last week to the Ontario Superior Court, and Justice David Stinson, realizing there is an election this fall, promised to make his decision this month ?as quickly as possible, and I'll get it out as soon as I can.?

So let's look at the issue. Does the law really make it impossible for many people to get the proper ID to vote, as the critics claim, or is it just a sensible protection against voter fraud and part of a world-wide effort by countries to tighten up voting laws, as the government claims?

Under the new law, voters will need either a government-issued ID with a photo, name and current address; or two pieces of ID, one with the voter's address; or two pieces of ID plus somebody to attest to your address.

Lawyer Steven Shrybman, arguing against the law, told the court last week it would not only deny people their right to vote but ?public confidence in the outcome may hang in the balance.? Why? Well, Council of Canadians head Maude Barlow says that 14 highly contested ridings in the last election had a combined margin of victory of just 6,200 votes. ?This is not small numbers,? she said. ?They really can impact the whole election.?

Well, yes, they could, but only if you accept her unsupported claim that the new ID requirements are too onerous for the mythical ?tens of thousands? of voters, a proposition that Crown lawyer Christine Mohr said ? in the polite way they talk in court cases ? is ?wholly unsupported.?

The critics claim that the new provisions will disqualify many elderly people living in care homes, along with students and the homeless.

Really? Are they all suddenly helpless, lurching through their lives without ID and without any means to get them? Not likely. As Pierre Poilievre, the minister responsible for democratic reform, emailed The Globe and Mail last week, there are plenty of options. ?With the Fair Elections Act, Canadians can choose from 39 authorized forms of ID when voting. These easily-attainable documents range from Canadian passports and birth certificates to student ID cards, credit and debit card, and utility bills or bank statements.? Even a homeless person can use the address of soup kitchens and shelters to register themselves in order to be able to vote.

Ask yourself this: do you know anybody, including yourself, who does not have any of these documents?

And if they don't have any of these common, everyday documents, is it really impossible for them to get them before the election next fall?

Beyond the absurd fear-mongering of the critics ? and the ever-present concern that Stephen Harper is somehow trying to stack the election in his favour ? we have to ask ourselves is it really too much effort for voters to take a few small, easy steps to make sure that everybody who votes ? whomever they vote for ? is eligible to vote?

Can we just get a grip and get on with it?

