



"The saga of parliamentary reform has only just begun," writes David Mitchell, who adds that despite the pressure the young Democratic Institutions minister has been under: "It is too early to write off Maryam Monsef." House of Commons photo

Electoral Reform Revisited

David Mitchell

The Liberal government's promise of electoral reform has been one of its most controversial, pitting political agendas and suspicion of political agendas against each other in a heightened version of the traditional Ottawa power struggle. Then, in early June, the Trudeau government acceded to an NDP request to make the composition of the parliamentary committee examining the project more democratic itself. As David Mitchell writes, the broken logjam has expanded the possible outcomes.

The saga of Canadian electoral reform has only just begun. And yet, it's already revealed some important lessons about this new juncture in Canadian politics and should therefore prompt us to re-assess some of our assumptions.

Until recently, most of the partisan-fueled heat over the Liberal government's pledge to reform our system of voting had focused on speculation about process. This was largely partisan throat-clearing aimed at staking out positions

on imagined scenarios. Much of it was neither particularly constructive nor well-informed. But because the government was slow to initiate the file, critics predictably filled the vacuum with a grab-bag of opinion and insinuation.

When the plan was announced to set up a special parliamentary committee based on the House of Commons' usual formula for standing committee membership, the outcry from opposition parties was immediate. And it looked like the government was taken by surprise.

Opposition parties mounted an unprecedented challenge, arguing that just because the Liberals hold a majority of seats in the House, they shouldn't automatically seek to control a majority of seats on the special committee. The criticism was grounded in the not-outlandish notion that since the committee would be exploring alternatives to the current electoral system, it should be composed of MPs based upon their party's share of the vote in the last election, not their number of seats.

Apparently, the government hadn't considered this as an option. But opposition parties dug in their heels, claiming that if the Liberals held a majority of seats on the committee, they would use this advantage to ram through whatever electoral reforms they desired. And they kept up the pressure, arguing that the special committee—and therefore the government's plan to fulfill its election promise—were illegitimate as a result.

Given the opposition's unabated fervor, it seemed like the prospects for credible and collaborative reform of our electoral system were dim, if not dead. It seemed likely that the Liberal government would live to regret that they hadn't been more attuned to the mood of House and the prospects for the kind of cooperation necessary to effect meaningful change.

But then, after taking it on the chin for a few weeks, seemingly determined to proceed on the basis of

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the original plan for convening the special committee, the government changed its mind. When the NDP introduced a motion in the first week of June that proposed to alter the committee's membership to reflect each party's share of the vote, giving a majority to the opposition parties, the government astonished most observers by agreeing.

Not only is the electoral reform train back on the tracks, but the reaction to the Liberal government's changed position on what may appear to be a relatively minor procedural issue reveals the need to think about both politics and governance in Canada a bit differently.

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In particular, we need to revisit—if not discard—a few assumptions. These include:

There's no higher intelligence: A number of conspiracy theories have been advanced about the Liberals possibly looking for an opportunity to back away from their ambitious campaign promise to reform the elec-

toral system. Others have suggested that the governing party may have somehow cleverly choreographed their willingness to accept the demands of opposition parties in order to appear conciliatory.

In fact, the NDP motion to change the special committee membership was an unexpected political gift the government simply couldn't refuse. Sure, there are some smart minds directing Liberal strategy. But with a new, hyper-activist government trying to simultaneously advance numerous bold policy initiatives, there's also plenty of room for human error.

Conspiracy theorists usually prefer to ignore the fact that there's rarely a higher intelligence operating in the corridors of power.

It's too early to write off Maryam Monsef: The person taking the heat for the government on this file is a young, new MP who is also the Minister for Democratic Institutions. Standing in the House almost on a daily basis to respond to aggressive opposition questions hasn't been easy for the rookie politician. Supported by media and communications training, Monsef's ability to publicly manage this complex file provides a significant test for the claim that cabinet government is back, and that utterances by ministers will no longer be crafted by Svengalis in the PMO.

Nevertheless, predictions of Monsef's demise may be very premature. The onerous responsibility of delivering on an important policy commitment of the government will either make or break a potentially promising political career. But it would be unwise to write Monsef off, especially now that electoral reform seems to be back on track.

A referendum on what? One bizarre



With the agreement on the makeup of the special committee on June 2, the debate on democratic reform moves from process to substance. And what a debate it will be. *Policy* photo

aspect of the early, pre-committee debate on the issue of electoral reform was the sharp line being drawn on the issue of whether or not a referendum should be required to validate any proposed change. How could anyone take an entrenched position on a matter that had not yet been discussed, let alone proposed?

What if the special committee ends up recommending electronic voting? Would such a reform require a referendum? How about mandatory voting?

Of course, it's the government's pledge to replace our first-past-the-post system with something new that has generated the most fevered reaction. But surely it's far too soon to be focused exclusively on the issue of a referendum six months before the special committee concludes its work and issues its report by the scheduled deadline of December 1st.

Would a ranked ballot favour the Liberals? In spite of the fact that the special committee has now been structured on the basis of proportional representation, we shouldn't assume that the committee will therefore recommend some kind of PR system of voting. In fact, it has been widely assumed, based in part upon past comments of the prime minister, that the Liberal government would prefer a system based upon a ranked or preferential ballot.

Further, it has also been widely re-

ported, as some kind of conventional wisdom, that a ranked ballot would favour the Liberals because they are a centrist party and quite possibly a popular second choice for many voters inclined to support other parties. Indeed, some analysts have even pored over the results of the last election to show that the Liberals may have won even a larger majority of seats if a preferential ballot had been used in 2015.

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The fallacies associated with these assumptions are actually quite staggering. The past provides no template for the future. And the unintended consequences of implementing any electoral reform simply can't be anticipated. In addition, in an age when all political parties seeking to form government are now angling for the centre ground, where most voters are located, wouldn't it make sense for the Conservatives, NDP and others to try to position

themselves as popular second choices for voters supporting other parties?

Taking a second look: For generations now, a government's change of mind has been routinely condemned as either a sign of weakness or hypocrisy. But what if it's actually a sign of reflection and flexibility—in other words, good politics?

The language used to characterize the Liberal government's willingness to accept the NDP motion on membership of the electoral reform committee was quite revealing. It was said, for instance, that the Liberals “caved” and that it was an “embarrassing climbdown.” Some critics described it as a “major reversal” from the government's attempt to “rig the system.” And it was suggested that the Liberals were humbled by their “walk-back.”

It's also possible that the government simply hadn't thought this through sufficiently. What if the Liberals' willingness to reconsider actually foreshadows a different approach to implementing policy in our country? What if this is actually a new way of doing business on the part of a government and prime minister who are surprisingly comfortable with reevaluating their ideas and methods and quick to apologize for their inevitable mistakes?

A couple of generations ago in British Columbia, an extraordinarily successful Premier, W.A.C. Bennett, was famous for taking a “second look” at policies and ideas he had proposed. “Wacky” Bennett used this to his government's great advantage—and the consternation of his political opponents. He served flamboyantly as premier of B.C. for 20 years.

Perhaps a variation on this old-fashioned approach to governing is now being revived in Ottawa? We might need to get used to it. **P**

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