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The Matter of Electoral Reform

I count myself among those who are disappointed by the recent decision of the federal government not to move forward, at the present time, with changing Canada's current electoral system.

And at the same time I believe the decision is in the national interest given the circumstances.

I continue to believe that our current "first past the post" electoral system is flawed and that better alternatives exist.

However I was very clear during the 2015 election campaign and since that no political party should attempt to unilaterally change the electoral system - to do so would invite legitimate criticism that such a change was being made solely to further the interests of that particular party. A country's electoral system is intimately tied to issues of democratic process and integrity. To change the electoral system in Canada, in my mind, requires - at a minimum - agreement and support between at least two of Canada's three major parties.

In search of consensus

A significant attempt was made by parliamentarians of all political stripes to find a basis for consensus. With a personal passion and academic background in this area, I invested many hours seeking to find areas of common ground that would enable progress.

However, after many months of effort at many levels, it was clear there is currently no consensus regarding which electoral model Canada should adopt if in fact we were to change the system.

The NDP was unrelenting in its support of a particular form of proportional representation - a system that would require far larger constituencies (and thus less local representation) and would strengthen the power of political parties to themselves choose some MPs.

The Conservatives opposed any change.

And Liberal MPs held views that ranged from support for a preferential ballot system to modified versions of proportional representation. The lack of any political consensus on the

horizon was debilitating to efforts to move the issue forward at this time.

Amongst Canadians themselves - as was evident at the Town Hall Meeting I hosted in North Vancouver in September - there were disparate views as to which principles were most important in choosing an electoral system and which alternative would be best for Canada.

Promises and change

Governments should be accountable for the platforms on which they campaign - and this government should indeed be held to account for this unfulfilled campaign pledge.

At the same time however it is - in my view - essential that as circumstances change, as views are clarified and as new issues and realities emerge, governments must also be flexible.

A responsible government and a healthy democratic process must be prepared for the possibility that priorities and campaign promises are subject to re-evaluation if in fact circumstances change. Governments clearly must be able to explain and justify such changes, but some such flexibility is a critical element to the effective functioning of a parliamentary democracy. Some have suggested that the government should have driven forward, in the absence of any cross-party agreement, to force a referendum on the country.

However, is debating the Canadian electoral system really what Canadians want to be the focus of the next 12-18 months? Is it a sufficiently high priority at a time of great uncertainty with regard to international affairs, trade, the economy, climate change, child poverty and the critical needs of indigenous communities? The answer of this government is, no - not at this time.

And, as personally disappointed as I am with the lack of consensus with regard to a path forward on this matter, I believe this decision is the correct one.

Looking to the future, I intend to continue the discussion of electoral reform with my colleagues from all parties to see if, over the medium term, we may come up with ideas and concepts that could enable the emergence of a broader consensus.

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