
The Democratic Reform Agenda: What is Next?

Hon. Tim Uppal, MP

This article looks at what has been accomplished in the area of democratic reform prior to the 2011 general election and discusses recent initiatives in three areas – Senate reform, strengthening the political financing regime, and restoring fair representation in the House of Commons.



The review and improvement of our democratic system is a significant responsibility. Democratic reform is of the utmost importance because it is about how Canadians are represented in our democratic institutions. A free and democratic society is based on the premise that the citizen must be heard.

Canada's political history is a story of progressively giving citizens a greater voice in our political institutions.

The franchise is no longer defined by being a 'Male British Subject, aged Twenty-one Years or upwards, being a Householder, as it was in 1867. Today, the franchise extends to all adult citizens of Canada. Citizenship is the only criterion that matters. Distinctions based on gender, race, or property no longer serve as markers for the right to vote.

We have independent, free and fair elections; we have a free and healthy press; and we have strong oversight and regulation of money in our political process. While we may take some of our democratic rights and freedoms for granted, these accomplishments are the result of hard work and dedication by those seeking to make us freer and more democratic as a country.

But our work is never done. We should never become complacent. We should never forget the trust and integrity on which our democracy relies. We must continue to strengthen the voice of citizens. In pursuing a democratic reform agenda, our Government seeks to enhance the voice of Canadians by ensuring that

they are effectively represented in both the House of Commons and the Senate.

Since 2006, Prime Minister Harper has pursued a principled agenda of democratic reform. In our flagship accountability measure the *Federal Accountability Act*— our government took big money out of political contributions. We eliminated political donations by corporations, unions and associations. By limiting the potential for undue influence, these reforms help to ensure that our democratic institutions represent the voice of all Canadians.

We also strengthened the integrity of the electoral process by reducing the possibility for fraud at the polls by passing voter identification measures. These measures strengthen our ability to identify voters and made the regulations around the voter identification more robust.

We acted to reform the way elections are called in this country by passing fixed dates for federal elections. Fixed election dates provide greater fairness and predictability in the calling of elections during stable, majority governments.

Current Priorities

As highlighted in the June Speech from the Throne, we will pursue principled reforms that aim to strengthen and enhance our democratic institutions. Let me begin by outlining our reforms to the Senate. Our democratic reform objectives are about strengthening and enhancing our democratic institutions so that the voice of Canadians can be heard. In no institution is there greater need for this voice than in the Senate. The effectiveness and the legitimacy of our upper chamber suffers because senators have no democratic mandate from Canadians and can serve terms of up to forty-five years.

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Over the years, Canadians have consistently said that they want to see change in the upper chamber. As recently as July 2011, a poll found that just one-in-twenty Canadians support the status quo, while 70 percent support the direct election of senators. Our Government agrees with Canadians – the status quo in the Senate is unacceptable.

In June 2011, I introduced the *Senate Reform Act*, which will limit senator's terms and aims to encourage provinces and territories to consult citizens on who should represent them in the Senate.

While the act does not require provinces to establish a democratic process, it does require the Prime Minister to consider the names of individuals identified through democratic consultation processes. We believe real input by Canadians into their Senate representatives will increase the Senate's effectiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of Canadians.

The bill will also limit senators' terms so that the Senate is refreshed with new ideas on a regular basis. Under the current rules, an individual can be appointed to the Senate at age 30 and serve until age 75. In our view, it is not acceptable in a modern democracy that an individual could sit in a house of Parliament for such a long time with little accountability to Canadians.

Under the *Senate Reform Act*, senators appointed after the royal assent of the bill would be subject to a nine-year term. The nine-year term will also apply to all current senators appointed after October 2008, with their terms ending nine years after the royal assent of this bill. Although the changes we have proposed are modest, they can only serve to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Senate. Canadians have been clear in saying that they have no appetite for long, drawn-out, constitutional battles.

That is why we are proceeding with Senate reform that is reasonable, is achievable, and is clearly within Parliament's constitutional authority.

Political Financing: Per-Vote Subsidies and Political Loans Accountability Act

A second priority of our democratic reform agenda is to strengthen the rules surrounding our political financing regime. As announced in Budget 2011, we will phase out the per-vote taxpayer subsidies to federal political parties. We believe that parties receive adequate public support by virtue of their ability to issue tax receipts for contributions and to receive a partial reimbursement of election expenses. Eliminating the allowance would encourage parties to step up their fundraising efforts.

As the Prime Minister has said, our view is that there is a role for some public finance, but it has to be tied to a party's own efforts or to the willingness of voters to actually contribute money.

Canadians should be able to choose whether or not they want to fund political activities, and parties should not rely on hand-outs to fund their political initiatives. They should be making their own efforts to engage with citizens and raise their own money. This measure was included as part of the fall budget bill.

We also plan to introduce measures to strengthen the rules around political loans. The *Federal Accountability Act* eliminated contributions by corporations and unions. It changed the rules to ensure that politicians will not be beholden to those with deep pockets, and unions or corporations who *give* too much money. However, our law still allows those with deep pockets to lend too much money.

We believe the rules concerning political loans should be consistent with the rules for political contributions. Like hard-working Canadians, parties and candidates should be required to take out loans from financial institutions on a commercial rate of interest. Ordinary Canadians are expected to pay-back loans under strict rules; the same should apply to politicians. Political loans should not be a loophole to allow corporations, unions or wealthy individuals to exert undue influence on the political process.

Representation in the House of Commons

A third priority in our democratic reform agenda is to restore fair representation to the House of Commons. Our federation is forever changing and our democratic institutions must change with it. Citizens move from one region to another and we continue to welcome new people from countries all over the world.

Currently, the faster-growing provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario are underrepresented in the House of Commons. This means that the representation of the citizens from these provinces is significantly different from that of other provinces. This gap should be addressed.

The electoral district of Brampton-West has the most constituents in the country, with 170,422 people, which is much higher than the national average riding size. And underrepresentation in fast-growing provinces is even more striking for new Canadians and visible minorities.

Canada's visible minority population is increasing, largely through immigration, and visible minority immigrants tend to settle in urban centres in faster-

growing provinces. According to the 2006 Census, visible minorities make up approximately 16 percent of Canada's population. Now, 16 percent is significant – but it is even more significant when you consider that this 16 percent is concentrated in the fast-growing provinces of British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta. In Ontario, visible minorities make-up 23 percent of the population.

British Columbia, Ontario, and Alberta are the most diverse provinces in Canada. The underrepresentation of fast-growing provinces contributes to the significant underrepresentation of new Canadians and visible minorities.

The Government's commitment to restore fair representation to the House of Commons will help reduce the impact of this underrepresentation. We will be taking action in the coming weeks to restore fair representation by introducing a principled formula for allocating House of Commons seats. The update to the formula will be designed to ensure fairness for both faster and slower growing provinces.

We are committed to ensuring that Quebec's seat count will not drop below its current 75 seats, and that the population of Quebec remains proportionately represented. We will follow-through on that commitment.

As the next boundary readjustment process is to start in 2012, it is my hope that the bill will be passed

as quickly as possible. Electoral boundaries are redrawn every ten years after each decennial census by independent, non-partisan boundary commissions that are set up for each province.

Each boundary commission consists of a judge appointed by the provincial chief justice and two other commissioners appointed by the Speaker of the House of Commons. In determining boundaries, commissions balance the principle of representation by population with other factors, including the special characteristics of communities and the need to maintain a manageable geographic size for districts in sparsely populated rural or northern regions in order to achieve effective representation for citizens.

Conclusion

A free and democratic society requires that citizens be effectively represented in our political institutions. Since we were first elected in 2006, our Government has sought to strengthen the integrity of our democratic institutions to provide citizens with greater confidence in the democratic process. In 2011 we received a renewed mandate to proceed further with our commitments. The path of improvement is not easy, but our work is never done. We should never become complacent. We should never forget the trust and the integrity on which our democracy relies. We must continue to strengthen our voice as citizens.

Editor's Note: On October 27, 2011, Bill C-20, *An Act to Amend the Constitution Act, 1867, The Electoral Boundaries Readjustment Act and the Canada Elections Act* was introduced in the House of Commons. It provides additional seats for Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia and Québec.