



Guest Column / Elizabeth May

Trudeau's Big Test—Will Electoral Reform be Real?

It is the boldest reform, wrapped in an unequivocal promise: 2015 will be the last election held under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system. It was part of the Liberal platform and was confirmed in the Speech from the Throne.

The NDP also promised to get rid of FPTP, as did the Green Party. So while FPTP delivered, once again, a “false majority”—a majority for the Liberals with 39 per cent of the popular vote—nearly 65 per cent of Canadians voted for a candidate running on a platform for electoral reform. On this issue, as on climate change and our healthcare system, among a handful of others, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau can claim support from two Canadians in three.

Trudeau's reforms do not end with changing the way we vote. He has executed the most sweeping reforms of the exercise of prime ministerial powers since his father started the process of accumulating them. He is the first prime minister since Lester B. Pearson to recognize that being prime minister is not a full-time job. Like most pre-1970 Canadian prime ministers, he has retained portfolios for himself. He has sent clear signals, such as through the unprecedented publication of ministerial mandate letters, that we are returning to true government-by-cabinet.

Ministers are to be responsible for their departments—and for their own conduct and performance. We are back to respecting the principle of ministerial accountability. And committees are to be liberated. We are told that parliamentary secretaries will not whip votes in committees.

The mandate letter to House Leader Dominic LeBlanc is full of welcome news—fewer whipped votes, no more omnibus budget bills, more decorum and respect in the House. In other words, the total top-down control from the PMO is ending.

And here is where the two big reforms collide. It will be the real test of the commitment to ministerial control over departments and the liberation of parliamentary committees if electoral reform leads to proportional representation (PR).

Minister for Democratic Institutions Maryam Monsef is off to an impressive start. She has already fulfilled item one of her mandate letter—creation of an arm's length, blue-ribbon advisory board for recommendations for Senate appointments.

For electoral reform, she has promised broad and open national consultations. Proportional representation is on the table as an option. But so, too, is a move to ranked or preferential ballots.

We know the Liberal caucus is split on the issue. When the NDP used one if its opposition days in the last Parliament to advance a motion favouring mixed-member proportional (MMP) voting, the Liberal MPs were split pretty much right down the middle. Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion is an enthusiastic proponent of proportional representation, having proposed his own hybrid version to accommodate Canada's regional particularities. But in that split vote, we know how our future PM voted. Trudeau is personally against proportional representation and he favours another form of majoritarian voting. A ranked ballot may seem an improvement, but its advantages are

illusory. As polling analyst Eric Grenier concluded for CBC News, the Liberals, with 39 per cent of the vote in 2015, would have won even more seats with ranked ballots.

Ranked ballots are no real reform at all. Virtually every pundit predicts the fix is in; that Trudeau will tell Monsef what he wants and Liberal MPs on committee will vote as instructed.

I am going to go out on a limb here and disagree with the cynics. I predict we will get an open and honest national consultation. I predict Liberal MPs will be encouraged by the minister and her Parliamentary Secretary, Mark Holland, to provide their own best advice. I believe we have a real chance to move to the fairest voting system, likely a hybrid, such as what Dion has proposed.

I am prepared to suspend disbelief and accept that Trudeau means what he says. After all, that Liberal vote in the House in the last Parliament was allowed to be a free vote. The support for PR was strong, even if the anti-PR votes in the Liberal caucus edged out the pro-MMP MPs. How can I accept that there is any chance the Liberal MPs will choose a system that is fairer but will disadvantage their own party?

Because to believe otherwise is to assume Trudeau means none of what he says. A rigged process moving in the direction of enshrining Liberal power forever will make everything else Trudeau claims to embrace not sunny ways but a trick of the light—a transitory non-reform.

Electoral reform will be the ultimate test of the new prime minister's credibility. **P**

Elizabeth May is leader of the Green Party of Canada. elizabeth.may@parl.gc.ca