

MP PENSIONS

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In his last piece in this space, Dan Veniez said "Current MPs are conveniently hiding behind courageous souls like former Liberal MP Martha Hall Findlay, who reportedly defended the indefensible pension scheme ... She and others argue that since MPs have no job security, a generous pension is needed to attract qualified people."

<http://www.ipolitics.ca/2012/01/24/dan-veniez-will-harper-use-his-majority-to-put-an-end-to-mps-gold-plated-pensions/>

While I appreciate that Dan thought I was being 'courageous', he missed some of what I've been saying – which is not restricted to the existing pension scheme. Indeed, I've said that as we focus on pension reform generally, both public and private; as we recognize that our various pension schemes are increasingly unaffordable, it entirely appropriate that MPs pensions be brought under scrutiny as well.

My point, which I unabashedly make, is that good overall compensation is needed to attract good MPs. The pension scheme is only one aspect of an MP's compensation. If we are going to review pensions alone, without looking at all of the other aspects, pro and con, of being an MP - including salaries and benefits and the lack of job security, then yes, I support keeping the pension scheme – albeit with some changes. (Although I was elected twice as an MP, I do not get a pension as I wasn't there long enough, so I'm not defending anything that I have a personal stake in.) I have acknowledged that the current scheme IS very generous -- too generous -- and I have offered some concrete suggestions to address some of the concerns.

We want to attract the best people to govern our country, but as someone who spends a lot of time encouraging others to run (especially women, because we don't have enough of them), it's hard. Most of the time the response is, "Are you kidding?!" People see all sorts of negatives beyond money or the lack of job security: long hours; half of one's time in a city away from family and friends; loss of privacy; always having to be "on", because you never know who will take an unflattering photo or a quote out of context; knowing that as soon as you make a mistake (and you will, because we're all human) the media and other parties will pounce on you (there is no forgiveness in politics); worry that your kids (or parents) will wake up and see their loved one humiliated in a scathing cartoon; partisan attack ads that rip people apart; hate mail (and now, hate tweets), because no matter how good you try to be, no matter what you do, there will be people who don't like you, or who disagree with you, and some among them are downright nasty about it - publicly. No wonder lots of people turn away.

But there are wonderful benefits, too. That is why so many of us have done it. Dan Veniez, for all the negative things he said about MPs and the world of Parliament Hill, tried to become one, running as a candidate. Had he been elected, he would have loved it. I loved it. I would love to do it again. I love that feeling that maybe, just maybe, with a lot of work and passion, one can make a difference and contribute, somehow, to this great country and the people in it.

But I'm afraid that loving it, and being passionate about it, are not, on their own, enough.

I, like many others, went into politics primarily because of that belief in public service. I, like many, was willing to put up with the negatives, because for me they were outweighed by the positives. I was also willing to sacrifice financially -- to be paid an income significantly less than what I was earning at the time. BUT -- as the primary income earner responsible for a household and three children, who at the time were finishing high school and beginning university, I would not have considered running if the overall compensation afforded MPs wasn't at least reasonably good. Maybe it's an easier decision for those who are independently wealthy, but that certainly wasn't me, or most people I know.

If most people agree that at least a certain level of compensation is needed to attract -- and to not dissuade -- good people, then the larger conversation has to be what that overall compensation should be. Maybe the answer is no pension at all but a big severance to deal with the job security concern -- but I know from experience that it's harder to attract good people to run provincially in jurisdictions like Ontario and Alberta where pensions were removed. Maybe the answer is just a better salary -- MPs' income, although very good compared to many Canadians, is much less than many, many people in Canada - doctors, lawyers, business people and even senior civil servants. Although the amount of pay some of these people receive may offend some people, it's a reality. If you're about to go for surgery, you want a doctor who knows what he or she is doing. When you have a legal problem, you want good legal advice. When we elect the people who will be making decisions about when to go to war; how and how much to fund our health care system; how much to tax your income -- we want the best people, too. In my own view, there is no shame in paying people well who competently do important work.

Yes, Dan argued that there are many MPs for whom the compensation is more than they could otherwise dream of. But I also know that there are many capable talented people who, despite a desire for public service, simply say no because the negative side of the ledger is seen as too strong. Dan offers some very good points about some of the other things that attract potential MPs, and which dissuade many others. I agree with many of them. And clearly, many have nothing to do with money. But I don't believe that we can ignore the financial aspect.

So back to pensions, because that's the issue at hand. I'm not wedded to pensions, but if that's what we're looking at in isolation, there are some improvements possible. I've already publicly suggested a couple of things, which may or not work, but at least they are suggestions: Start the payments at 60 or 65 instead of 55 -- that alone would save taxpayers a great deal. And something I've suggested for a long time -- term limits for MPs. Note that although this would

save taxpayers a lot in pensions, it is also valid for good governance. It is a common recommendation in corporate governance (particularly the not-for-profit sector), to limit the terms for Directors, to ensure new perspectives and new skill sets over time. I believe in public service - I don't believe that being an MP should be a life-long career.

A final word in response to Dan Veniez's piece. Let me come to the defence of the many MPs, of all parties, who do what they can, work really hard to know the facts and to make the right decisions. It's not all of them by any stretch, but there are many who, although we may disagree on specific policies, are there because they want a great Canada. I want more people like them to step up -- not fewer.