

POLITICALLY SPEAKING

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WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH THE SENATE? WE CERTAINLY NEED SOMETHING.

It has been painful, watching the likes of Mike Duffy, Pamela Wallin and Patrick Brazeau becoming household names – not, however, because of their prior careers, or accomplishments, as one would expect from people appointed to such high office as the Canadian Senate. No, these people have brought – and astoundingly continue to bring – shame to the Senate, and, unfortunately, to public office in Canada generally.

Let me stress that there are many wonderful, ethical, hard-working people in both the House of Commons and the Senate who are passionate about making a difference in this country. I have had the pleasure of working with many of them.

Unfortunately, however, a few bad apples give everyone a bad name.

Over the years, quite a few people have advocated for an elected Senate. I do not believe that we need two separate elected bodies. We already have far too much political gamesmanship and suffer the ugly side of politics just electing MPs.

But now, given recent events, there are more and more calls to abolish the Senate entirely. Abolition is a valid suggestion – after all, Newfoundland, Ontario, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Quebec all had upper chambers which, over time, they abolished. However, although this would be preferable to an elected Senate, I don't agree with either. I believe we still need the Senate at the federal level. Senators (those at least who really do work their jobs) fill a very important function – several, actually.

One is the work done on specific issues or policies that affect Canadian society. Canada doesn't engage Royal Commissions the way we used to, but a significant number of Senators, across party lines, have done incredibly valuable and thoughtful work that has significantly enhanced public policy, on issues such as improving our health care system, mental illness, and how to address poverty.

But the most important role of the Senate is to provide so-called “sober second thought”, in the review of legislation that is passed by the House of Commons. Sometimes the Senate improves it – and sometimes, it refuses

to pass it. Particularly when there is a majority government (as we have now under Stephen Harper), which gives the Prime Minister more authoritarian power than, for example, any President of the United States ever has, there is a need for checks and balances. In a majority government, only the Senate can provide that. This remains most important at the federal level, where significant decisions such as going to war, our country's finances, our foreign affairs, what constitutes a crime – are so important to our society. "Sober second thought" is, therefore, a good thing.

It is important also to note that either option – abolition or moving to an elected Senate – would require fundamental changes to the Canadian Constitution. Most Canadians would regard opening up a new round of Constitutional talks as akin to dental surgery.

So how do we address the two main complaints: (i) that the appointments are entirely partisan, so we're not getting objective participation; and (ii) appointments by the Prime Minister are seen as pure patronage, and as a result we don't get the best people for the job.

Here's a simple proposal that would address those concerns, requiring NO changes to the Constitution: The Prime Minister sets up a non-partisan (or multi-partisan) board of eminent advisors, similar to the group that recommends appointments to the Order of Canada. The Prime Minister then commits to appoint only the people that this board of advisors, collectively, recommends. The result will be people appointed to the Senate, not for their partisanship or for past favours, but because they are recognized and respected for the contributions they have already made to their communities and Canadian society – exactly the kind of people we would want to provide that wise, sober second thought.

So here's my challenge to Stephen Harper: after all of your complaints over many years about the Senate and patronage appointments, do you have the courage to make this simple, easy to accomplish and effective reform?