

From the House

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The New Voting Bill

The Conservatives have proven again with Bill C-23, the Fair Elections Act, that they have mastered the art of political double speak. We in the Official Opposition have renamed Bill C-23 the "Unfair Elections Act" because of its many provisions that will likely reduce voter turnout in the next election, and enhance the advantages for the Conservative.

How does this work, you may ask? Aren't we all on the side of increasing voter turnout?

The percentage of people voting has dropped steadily over the past few decades. This is very pronounced among younger voters. Surely this is a trend that anyone concerned with the health of our democracy would want to change?

When one examines the proposed Conservative legislation, the opposite is the case. Take for instance voter identification cards, which have been used by hundreds of thousands of Canadian voters when they go to the polls. With C-23, these cards, which are sent by the Government to all voters prior to the election, cannot be used by the voter to help establish their identity or their address when they arrive at the polling station.

Why has this been done? There are no cases on record of any voter fraud utilising these essential notices that go to Canadian citizens.

Another aspect of current voting practises that will be taken away is vouching by one person in the constituency for another who may not have proper identification with them when they get to the polls. One hundred and twenty thousand Canadians used this process in the last election, including many people in northern Canada. For families, seniors, disabled people and for students, the vouching system was one way to establish their right to vote, at the polling station, on election day. Once again, there are no cases of voter fraud in this instance and the studies that have

been done on the subject show no deliberate abuse of the vouching.

Too bad for these Canadians, who in opinion polls have shown that they are less likely to vote for the Conservative Party.

Another very contentious part of Bill C-23 is the restriction on the ability of the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) to promote the importance of getting out to vote. In other words, the CEO can only advertise the bare bones of his job, how to vote, proper identification, and location of polling stations. Any other efforts, such as promoting youth to vote, or explaining the importance of your vote will be prohibited. This aspect of the law is completely ridiculous and its inclusion in Bill C-23 can only be explained as voter suppression.

Six years ago, when the Conservatives brought in the new requirements for voter identification, I took a stand against that bill, saying that it would place an unnecessary burden on northerners and many other Canadians. That turned out to be the case. Now with this legislation, the situation will become much worse. What is the rationale for this legislation? Do the Conservatives understand through their extensive polling that their future electoral success lies with selective voter suppression?

This type of behaviour is rampant right now in the United States, where Republican governments in different states, realizing that minorities who don't vote for them, are constantly upgrading their election rules to cut these groups out of voting. We don't need this type of anti-democratic behaviour in Canada, and all of us should be vigilant against it.

In Parliament, the Conservatives forced closure on debate on second reading of Bill C-23. They refused at committee to hold public hearings across the country to find out what people think of the legislation. They are using their majority to push this bill through the House of Commons process. The Senate will likely be no help as well as they are a majority of Conservatives who take their orders from Prime Minister Harper.

Where is our democracy going, when fundamental issues like the rights of voters are treated in this fashion?