

Terry Glavin: Careful, Mr. Trudeau. Democracy is fragile and Canada isn't immune to the tailspin seen around the world

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There's been a national electoral reform awareness-raising community dialogue tour, "meaningful consultations with Canadians" by means of town-hall meetings by the dozen, "safe, inclusive and respectful" powerpoint presentations, workshops, informal surveys, write-in polls and carefully-crafted national public opinion surveys. There have been 57 separate meetings of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform since June.

There have been quite a few lively shouting matches in the House of Commons, disturbing allegations of bad faith, and counter-allegations of broken promises. Last week there was a hullabaloo about something called the Gallagher Index, a sort of Ouija Board you can use to divine a voting system's proportionality by gazing intently at the square root of half of the sum of the squares of the difference between the percentage of the votes in an election and the percentage of seats a given voting system produces, if I'm not mistaken.

This week's uproars have hinged on a national postcard mailout and a strangely creepy and quite possibly pointless Vox Pop Labs interactive online survey that gets around to telling you whether you're a Guardian, a Challenger, a Pragmatist, a Cooperator or an Innovator. Nobody seems to know what it's for.



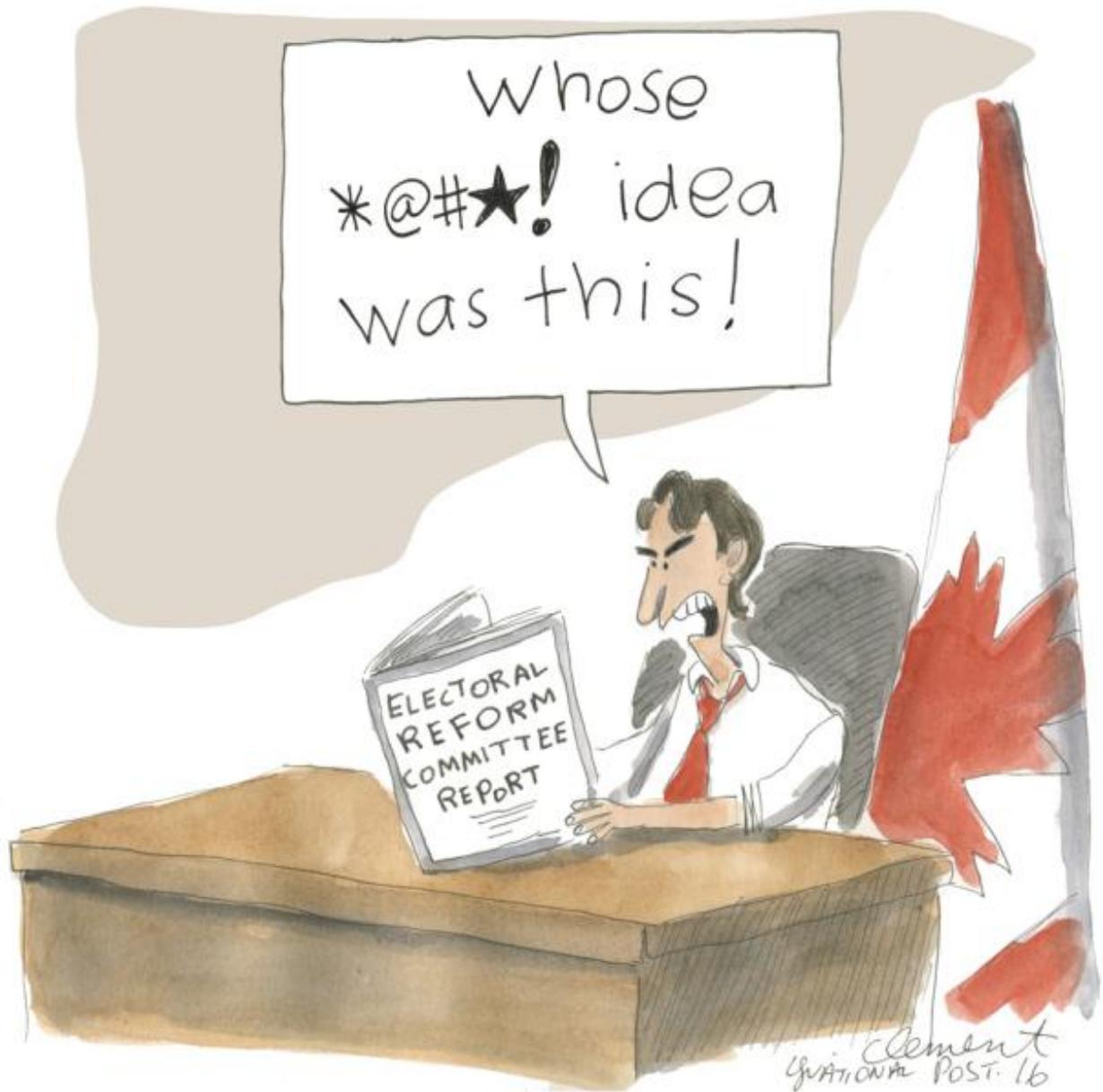
Fred Chartrand / Canadian Press Maryam Monsef in the House of Commons during question period on Parliament Hill, in Ottawa, Thursday, Dec. 1, 2016

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau insists that well before we all go the polls again, he's going to keep his promise to replace the first-past-the-post system Canadians have been using since Confederation. But rookie Democratic Institutions Minister Maryam Monsef insists that the question of how we'll vote, exactly, requires further public engagement. So maybe there will be séances, or ritual drumming, or palmistry.

It could well be that the Liberal party intends to screw us out of the national referendum on a proportional-voting system that the majority of us wanted and expected. It could also be that in all the shouting, we're missing a larger and far more important point: Canadians are almost uniquely fortunate among the people of the world at the moment, in that we're even capable of having these kinds of elaborate and arcane arguments at all. We don't know how lucky we are.

In either case, the Liberals as well as the Opposition parties should be mindful of the explosive forces they're dealing with here. Canada is not magically immune to the corrosion of disillusionment and cynicism that has sent liberal democracy into a tailspin the world round over the past decade. It was a dangerously deep malaise among Canadians about this country's political institutions that moved Trudeau to promise electoral reform in the first place. And that pledge played no small role in the Liberals' election win last October, even if it was with only 39.6 per cent of the popular vote.

One of the ugliest features of the now mercifully concluded American election cycle was president-elect Donald Trump's incitement of paranoia among his far-right lumpen followers about the integrity of the electoral system itself. It was rigged, he bellowed. There would be widespread, organized voter fraud on election day. He's still talking like that.



Gary Clement / National Post

During the final months of Stephen Harper's tired and cranky Conservative government, in a poll carried out by the Environics Institute and the Institute on Governance (IOG) for the Americas Barometer Study, one in three Canadians expressed a strong degree of distrust in Parliament, and nearly seven in 10 said they feared political parties would illegally manipulate the results of the upcoming federal election. Unlike the American hysteria, the Canadian paranoia was most pronounced among voters who identified themselves as "on the political left."

Around the same time, the 75-year-old American institution Freedom House released its annual assessment of human rights and democracy around the world. All the standard indicators of free societies had continued to fall for the ninth year in a row. "Acceptance of democracy as the world's dominant form of government — and of an international system built on democratic ideals — is under greater threat than at any other point in the last 25 years," said Arch Puddington, Freedom House vice-president for research.

"The time is out of joint. The post-1989 liberal order is unravelling before our eyes," is the way Ivan Krastev, a fellow with the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, puts it. Owing to the belligerence of the emboldened regimes in Beijing and Moscow and the proliferation of armed conflicts around the world, Western democracies are in eclipse.

The shine has gone off the Western model of free markets and globalization. Liberal democracies themselves are in crisis, owing to the rise of what is usually called populism.

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Despite the immediately obvious neofascist traits attributable to Donald Trump's most strident supporters, it is not just from the far right that the rot has been spreading.

Poland is quickly transforming into a far-right dystopia. Stanisław Piotrowicz, a former prosecutor from the 1980s Communist regime, is now a leading figure in the Law and Justice Party government. Venezuela's economy was destroyed and the country is now on the verge of failed-state status thanks to the hard-left populism of Chavismo. The strongest anti-globalization currents in Europe and North America over the past quarter of a century came not from Britain's Nigel Farage and his UKIP cronies, but from the activism and global protest spectacles of the "anti-imperialist" left.

Recent research published by Roberto Foa of the World Values Survey and Yascha Mounk, a lecturer in political theory at Harvard University, has up-ended long-standing assumptions about the solidity of liberal democracy: the rot comes from within. Data culled from three decades' worth of polling from the World Values Survey shows a dramatic across-the-board decline in fundamental democratic values among Europeans and Americans.

Trust in political institutions has precipitously declined along with voter turnout and party membership. The Baby Boomers' withdrawal from conventional political engagement to "activism" and various single-issue "anti-system" preoccupations appears to have driven democracy into "a state of serious disrepair." Millennials are even less formally engaged in political life, engaging instead in boycotts, social movements, "grassroots" politics and protests — but even less so than their parents.



Sean Kilpatrick / Canadian Press Prime Minister Justin Trudeau responds to a question during question period in the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2016

Most worrying is that only about one in three American millennials see civil rights as "absolutely essential" to

democracy, and one in four millennials dismiss even the importance of free elections. One in four millennials considers democracy to be a “bad” or “very bad” way to run a country.

As recently as the 1990s, young people were more democratically-minded than their elders, especially in defence of freedom of speech. Not nowadays, as any glance at the rumpuses on campus will show. Only a third of millennials say civil rights are “essential” to democracy.

To their credit, Trudeau’s Liberals have been acutely aware of the implications of an entire generation disengaging from democratic values and institutions. Trudeau reached out to younger voters, and they put him over the top last October. It wasn’t all about reforming the marijuana laws, either. Electoral reform had a lot to do with it.

Two months ago, a survey by the Environics Institute and the Institute on Governance revealed that Canadian opinion had turned around from the dark days of late 2014. Most Canadians seem to think the federal government is working quite well now that the Liberals are running the show.

But Trudeau’s sleazy associations with regime-anointed Chinese billionaires, his palm-greasing cash for access soirees, his inattention to the crisis in housing affordability, and letting down the side on the solemn promises he made to First Nations, real or perceived, it all adds up.

Making a hash of the electoral reform file would be the last straw. What’s at stake is more than just votes for the Liberal party. It’s about the public trust. It’s about basic civic hygiene, and the vital health of liberal democracy in Canada.

It’s how the rot gets in.