

Reform won't be easy

I am pleased that the prime minister, at long last, has acknowledged his constitutional responsibility to appoint Senators.

I am concerned, however, over the timing of these appointments, in particular the fact that they are occurring in the midst of a global economic crisis, as well as at a time when Parliament has been prorogued and the government's activities are supposed to be very limited.

The fact that Stephen Harper has consistently opposed the constitutionally mandated appointment of Senators, yet rushed to appoint them before the holidays, shows not only that he has little regard for our form of government and its traditions, but that he is more concerned with power than principle.

This move is, sadly, now part of an increasingly long list of broken promises from Harper -- his pledge to hold elections on fixed dates, his declared intention to collaborate with opposition parties, his statement that his government would not run a deficit, as well as his pledge not to introduce new taxes on income trusts, being just a few.

In addition to Harper's change of heart on appointing Senators, Canadians are now being told that a Liberal-controlled Senate is blocking legislation relating to Senate reform, particularly Bill C-20, which calls for the election of senators. This is, in fact, not true.

Bill C-20, introduced by Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan in November 2007, has not reached the Senate. The bill was being studied by a Commons committee in June 2008, and died when Harper shut down Parliament and called for an election this past fall.

Harper fears, perhaps, that his agenda on Senate reform cannot advance due to the presence of an Opposition majority in the Senate. In order to become law, however, Senate reform bills must follow a process much more comprehensive than the usual three readings in the House of Commons, followed by three readings in the Senate.

Senate reform is a constitutional matter, and as such requires agreement by seven of the provinces representing at least 50 per cent of the Canadian population. Thus, significant Senate reform could not occur through a simple vote in Parliament; it would in fact require an extensive national consultation process.

So far, only Alberta and Saskatchewan have agreed to elect senators prior to appointment. Other provinces have rejected the idea, and a few have threatened legal challenges if Ottawa moves unilaterally on Senate reform.

Appointing Conservative senators at the 11th hour will not change these requirements.

Claudette Tardif, deputy leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Liberal senator for Alberta, Ottawa