

Democratic Reform Study - A Story with No Legs

In the last few days, articles have appeared in the Canadian media referring to a “sham” study underway on electoral reform. The stories deal with the Frontier Centre’s role in a federal consultation on that subject, and allege that our organization has somehow predetermined the conclusions of that process. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Here are some short clarifications of the most egregious of those errors:

1. The Frontier Centre for Public Policy is a right-wing, libertarian think tank.

The Frontier Centre is an independent, non-partisan think tank which avoids simplistic labels such as right and left. One of our main functions is to provide an independent forum for new thinking, a commodity in short supply in Canada. We have hosted and provided a forum for the views of individuals from all political parties, including the NDP, Liberals, and the Green Party. We have a ten-year record of policy outputs widely regarded as both cutting-edge and honest.

2. The Centre has a long record of opposing electoral reform.

Electoral reform has never been a major area of focus for the Frontier Centre. As of March 23rd the Frontier website contained 1724 publications, and only seven of those published by us had anything to do with the topic. Two or three 800-word commentaries, written by guest New Zealand writers who do not work for the Frontier Centre, examined that country’s experience with proportional representation. To describe that as a “long record of opposing electoral reform” is a wild stretch, indeed.

The Centre has also featured the work of Liberal Senator Mac Harb, who has proposed compulsory voting in Canada. As well, Frontier has discussed senate reform with Alberta senators-elect. But the opinions they expressed were theirs. We merely offered them a neutral forum, our mandate.

3. The Centre is leading deliberative consultations.

The extensive effort to consult Canadians on increasing civic engagement and exploring democratic and political reforms in Canadian society is being led by the respected Toronto-based research and polling firm, Compas. As part of a contract with the federal government to conduct the project, Compas was required to involve a registered public policy think tank. Because the Frontier Centre has done innovative work in issues of aboriginal governance, we were considered to be ideally suited for one of the most important focuses of this project. Compas has retained an experienced project team that includes distinguished policy experts like Gordon Gibson, who are acknowledged experts on democratic and electoral reform.

We look forward to working with Compas to provide a useful, forward-looking report, and consider this silly flap to be a non-story.

Tories electoral reform study a charade': critics

\$900,000 contract goes to libertarian group opposed to changes

OTTAWA (CP) — A right-wing, libertarian think-tank with a long record of opposing electoral reform has been awarded a contract by the federal Conservative government to probe public perceptions of . . . electoral reform.

Opposition politicians are livid that the Winnipeg-based Frontier Centre for Public Policy will write the consultation report, based on discussions with what is supposed to be a representative sample of Canadians.

But *The Canadian Press* has learned that at least some of the recruitment of participants was compromised even before the Frontier Centre begins leading what the government calls “deliberative consultations.”

Compas Public Opinion and Customer Research confirmed Thursday that an unauthorized sub-sub-contractor had been recruiting participants for forums this Friday and Saturday in Winnipeg and in Oakville, Ont.

Sources say Brooks and Done, a Calgary firm, was seeking up to 80 participants and accepting unsolicited applications after putting out a last-minute, word-of-mouth call this week.

Compas, which along with the Frontier Centre is jointly contracted to conduct the consultation, said Brooks and Done has been dropped and all applicants will be vetted by the polling firm. Compas president Conrad Winn said Thursday that only five per cent of the participants for the two forums were recruited by the firm.

The overall project, which is budgeted to cost up to \$900,000, is supposed to canvass a cross-section of society to plumb public thinking on “the challenges facing Canada’s electoral system and democratic institutions,” according to the contract tender.

The tender stated that a think-tank would be required to assist participants in a deliberative consultation, “have them learn about an issue in an objective/impartial manner; deliberate on it, and then discuss their conclusions.”

The Frontier Centre’s website includes links to stories such as: [Why I’m a Recovering Electoral Reformer, The Unintended Consequences of Electoral Reform and Canada Should Keep ‘First Past the Post’ Voting System.](#)

No one from the centre would comment Thursday, instead directing questions to the federal Privy Council Office in Ottawa.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper once co-authored a paper that sang the praises of proportional representation as a voting system but noted that it’s “seldom in the short-term interest of the party in power to carry out electoral reform.”

A spokesperson for Peter Van Loan, the Conservative cabinet minister responsible for democratic reform, said the Frontier contract was awarded based on objective criteria in the tender: “There was no political interference,” said Mike White.

But New Democrat MP Catherine Bell, who has been trying to get answers on the consultation for weeks, said Frontier’s role is shocking.

“I’m quite angry,” Bell said in an interview. “I find it quite surprising that a government that constantly preaches to be so accountable . . . would do something so underhanded and manipulative.”

Liberal Stephen Owen called the consultation process “a charade.”