

WITH Senator Mac Harb, Liberal Party of Canada



Born in Lebanon, Mac Harb graduated from the University of Ottawa with a Bachelor of Science and a M.A. in Engineering. A former engineer for Northern Telecom and professor at Algonquin College in Ottawa, Mr. Harb's political career started at the municipal level in Ottawa in 1985 as an alderman, and then as Deputy Mayor from 1987 to 1988. In 1988, Mr. Harb was elected to the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament for Ottawa Centre. Former Opposition Critic for Public Works, Urban Affairs and Housing, Mr. Harb sat on such committees as the Standing Committee on Multiculturalism and Citizenship, House Affairs, Public Accounts, and the Members Services Board. He also co-chaired the Liberal Task Force on Infrastructure in 1990. Mr. Harb was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade from December 1993 until 1995. He was interviewed after his speech on mandatory voting to the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Winnipeg on October 4, 2005.

Frontier Centre: Why do you want to make voting mandatory?

Mac Harb: Because of the fact that people, young people in particular, are not participating in the electoral process; less than one out of four do not bother.

FC: Do you think that policy should apply at all three levels of government?

MH: I believe that all three levels of government should adopt mandatory voting to ensure that all the people vote at all times for those who govern them.

FC: More than thirty countries have mandatory voting but most of them don't enforce the law. Wouldn't we be creating another victimless crime that is a waste of resources to enforce?

MH: Not at all. The mere fact that you have a law creates a deterrent. Seat-belt law is a case in point. Even though we don't do a lot of enforcement of seat-belt compliance, the compliance rate is about ninety percent. I believe that just having the law would by itself have a positive impact.

FC: Should such a provision be embodied in the constitution or in statutory law?

MH: No, it should be a part of legislation or bylaws at the municipal level.

FC: Should voting merely be declared to be a civic duty as in Italy's constitution or established as an affirmative citizen obligation, as in Australia?

MH: I would go with the Australian formula, because their system is very similar to ours.

FC: According to many, Australia has much better government policy than many countries, including Canada. In your opinion, is mandatory voting part of that?

MH: I take the position that, because of the fact that they have mandatory voting, they have more representative government than we do.

FC: Aren't you confusing rights with responsibilities? Classical liberal rights are negative in nature; they only require you to be left alone.

MH: Rights go with responsibilities. We have a right to drink fresh water but we have the responsibility to ensure that we pay taxes in order to keep waterways clean.

FC: In Australia where compulsory voting is at least minimally enforced, they have a problem called the "donkey vote," where unwilling voters exercise their franchise randomly. Wouldn't we be making the process a joke?

MH: That is the question, to do or not to do. In fact you have to look at the lesser of the two evils, and the lesser here is to ensure that everybody vote and then go out and educate those who you believe need education.

FC: Australia's voters also spoil more than five percent of their ballots. Why bother to drag people out if that's what they will do?

MH: The reality of it here is that those who do not vote are close to about thirty percent. As five percent, I would say it was worth the effort for us, for the sake of five-percent waste to reach out to the other twenty-five percent.

FC: What are the sanctions for an Australian who does not vote? A fine? Jail?

MH: A fine, but I understand that most of the people really get around the fine by providing a proper reason why they did not vote. We could do the same.

FC: If you have compulsory voting, what about the person who doesn't like any of the candidates? Is it fair to make that voter endorse someone he or she doesn't support?

MH: My proposal makes a provision for "none of the above." So somebody who is not happy with any of the above can still vote for "none of the above." There is a special box for that.

FC: If we had a line saying "none of the above," do you think voter turnout would increase?

MH: Possibly, but I doubt it. It needs to be compulsory, because those people who do not go to the voting booth are not going to know about it anyway.

FC: Does your bill propose a trial period?

MH: That's what I would like to see. My bill has a provision for review after a period of time.

FC: Do you think the use of the ballot should be expanded to included public referenda? Wouldn't the fact that the electorate could decide issues increase in turnout?

MH: Possibly, but the first step has to be mandatory voting because a referendum when only fifty percent bother to go to vote on an issue is not sufficient.

FC: What about special interest groups dominating politics. How would mandatory voting control them?

MH: By widening the base and ensuring everybody votes, in essence you reduce the power of special interests and you increase the power of the collectiveness of the people.

FC: What are the prospects for your bill passing?

MH: I would say it is fifty-fifty in the Senate; in the House of Commons, I'm not sure yet.

FC: What do you think of online or Internet voting, electronic voting?

MH: Both are excellent ideas. Once you introduce mandatory voting, then you would be able to entertain that, but entertaining that without the mandatory voting leaves you with the same problem.

FC: And mail-in ballots?

MH: The same thing. We do have a mail-in ballot now so for those who are out of the country, but nonetheless it should be expanded to include pretty well anybody who wanted to vote by mail-in ballot.

FC: What about a reward for voting instead of a sanction for example, a tax credit, or something like that?

MH: A great idea, but you would be rewarding the majority who are in compliance. What you want to do is penalize the minority who are not participating. Also, I cannot introduce a money bill in the Senate because it will not be votable in the House of Commons.

FC: Some countries like New Zealand and Germany have replaced the “first past the post” system with Parliaments proportioned partially according to the percentage of votes a party receives. Do you support that?

MH: It's an interesting question. I think that we should have a debate on that; perhaps a combination of the two is an option that should be entertained. I am personally of the view that mandatory voting should go first and then you should debate the rest.

FC: After recent elections, both New Zealand and Germany have failed to elect a government and had to go into prolonged negotiations to establish some kind of coalition government. Is our system any better?

MH: That's the downfall of having proportional representation, though, that you rarely end up with a clear majority government. Therefore it create problems.

FC: Do you think we should be electing our Senate?

MH: In the long term, yes, in the short term, no.

FC: Why is that?

MH: Because I think we have enough on our plate to deal with. We have to reform the laws governing elections first and then move on to the next step and decide if we want a Senate at all, and what sort of a Senate we would want. I take the views that Senators are like judges; perhaps what you want to do is keep them away from the political fray. You don't want to give them a lot more power than they already have, but you want to allow them the provision of being able to review laws based on their merit rather than their popularity.

FC: Some say the Senate produces outputs that are more thoughtful. In your opinion, why is that?

MH: First, because they have the time and, second, because they're not dealing with constituent issues but rather with policy issues. If you were to look at all of the reports that came out of the Senate, there are some fascinating ideas and suggestions. They probably would never, ever, have come out from an elected body whether that is a Senate or a House of Commons. I would think the status quo with some tinkering, some cleaning, and some modification might do the trick.

FC: Is the fact that the Senate has a lower media profile part of that?

MH: I think so. There is a lot less partisanship in the Senate than there is in the House of Commons. If you were to go and sit on a committee debating in the Senate you will see the level of debate is a lot higher and a lot more in depth than it is in the House of Commons.