

The moment of genuine interest in Canada's democracy afforded by Stephen Harper's defeat must not go to waste

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Canadian electorate this week ejected Stephen Harper, the long-serving and controversial Conservative Prime Minister of Canada, and replaced him with the Liberal Party's Justin Trudeau, who has promised to restore democracy to Canada after a decade of its slow-motion destruction. This moment must not be wasted, argues **Claudia Chwalisz**.*



On Monday, millions of Canadians showed Stephen Harper the door. After a decade of scandals – gagging scientists and civil servants, committing electoral fraud, proroguing parliament, getting rid of the long-form census, targeting progressive think tanks with aggressive audits, and violating the rights of First Nations among many other disgraces, Canadians finally have a prime minister who is willing to restore democracy to Canada.

Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party made one of the most impressive political comebacks in history. In 2011, the party suffered its worst result ever, winning a mere 19 per cent of the vote and 34 seats. After trailing in third place for most of the campaign, the Liberals now lead a majority government with 184 seats and almost 40 per cent of the popular vote.

The Liberals won offering Canadians a positive, inclusive, pluralistic counter-narrative to Harper's portrayal of our country. Naheed Nenshi, Calgary's mayor, summed it up well in an [editorial](#) last week: "When Canada works... it is because of that innate sense that every one of us, regardless of where we come from, what we look like, how we worship or whom we love, deserves the chance right here, right now, to live a great Canadian life."

It was when the full party platforms were revealed at the start of October that this hopeful language, coupled with a sensible economic plan and a strong democratic reform agenda brought the Liberals to the head of the race. They placed environmentalism and indigenous peoples' rights at the heart of the campaign, also pledging further support

to immigrants and refugees. Trudeau is both a small and large L liberal: pro-choice, pro-feminism and pro-legalising marijuana.

In addition, resuscitating Canada's democracy was at the heart of the Liberals' campaign. In June, the party announced a 32-point plan to restore democracy. The measures include strengthening access-to-information laws and empowering backbench MPs through free votes. Reforming Question Period (like Prime Minister's Questions in the UK) is also on the cards, so that one full day per week would be devoted to grilling the prime minister. The Liberals pledged to impose spending limits on political parties between elections, not just during campaigns, as well as gender equality in the appointment of cabinet members. New ideas include the creation of personal, secure online accounts for Canadians to access all of their government benefits and review key documents.

The two most cited proposals, however, were electoral and Senate reform. The former refers not only to replacing first-past-the-post (FPTP) in time for the next election, but extends to exploring mandatory voting and online voting. The Liberals promised that if elected, the government would replace FPTP with a new system decided upon by a special all-parliamentary committee and "national engagement" process where a new system will be fairly studied and considered. It is unclear at this point what is meant by 'national engagement' and whether ordinary citizens will have a chance to be involved in the process – the Ontario and British Columbia citizens' assemblies on electoral reform could be a source of inspiration.

In terms of Senate reform, the Liberals are slightly less ambitious. The party has already released all of its sitting Senators from partisan responsibilities, making them independent. In the future, Trudeau has said that he will only appoint independent Senators through an "open, transparent and public process" according to the party website. The stance most likely comes from suggestions in [Setting the New Progressive Agenda](#) for a new non-partisan advisory committee to recommend appointments on merit to the Prime Minister, comprising of one representative from each province and territory and "coming from all ways of life." The committee would be chosen by an ad hoc non-partisan House of Commons committee, on which Canadians would serve a three year, non-renewable mandate.

This moment of genuine interest in politics and democracy must not be wasted. While the commitment to reform is admirable in itself, the Liberals have an opportune moment to engage ordinary Canadians in these important debates. A national constitutional assembly, made up of randomly selected citizens from across the country, could and should be involved in deciding what kind of electoral and Senate reform is best. The best decisions are made when there is a diversity of perspectives around the table.

As the Canadian government returns to being a more open institution, hopefully it learns from [democratic innovators around the world](#) to choose a path of governing with the people.

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