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Wild Rose Report

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SHOULD A LAW OR ELECTIONS DEAL WITH FLOOR CROSSERS?

I don't often find much that resonates with me in Private Member's Bills put forward by the NDP. But there is one bill that deserves a closer look and I'd like to take this opportunity to ask your opinion on the matter.

The bill in question, C-306, would require sitting M.P.s who switch their political allegiance (i.e., "cross the floor") to resign and to contest their seat in a by-election, under the flag of the political party the member has adopted.

On the surface, the bill's goal to ensure that an MP's decision to change political parties is endorsed by his constituents seems laudable. Canadians give a party's platform at least as much weight as the person who represents it when casting their votes. So if voters who sent a Conservative to Parliament, for example, should wake one day to find their MP has become a Liberal, there's some justification in testing to see if that choice reflects the will of the voters.

But as with any bill, we must try to identify unintended consequences that could arise. Some have suggested that the bill could undermine the independence of Members of Parliament by restricting MPs who - usually in the interest of better representing their constituents - take a stance different than the one endorsed by their caucus. That serves to strengthen the controls that political parties can exert over individual members, to the detriment of local priorities.

The bill does still allow Members to sit as independents, but a problem remains with its wording. As the bill reads now, a newly independent MP could still go and sit in the caucus of another party and not trigger the by-election for his seat so long as he does not buy a membership to the new party. The bill has not found a way to address that scenario and therefore lacks teeth because, in a circumstance such as that, they have effectively crossed the floor anyway.

So what is your opinion on floor crossing?

Of six members who have crossed the floor since the 2004 election, only one got re-elected. That is a telling statistic. Is the fact that MPs will ultimately be held accountable for their decisions by their constituents at the next election enough of a counter-measure to leave the independence of MPs intact?

Or do you feel a mechanism such as Bill C-306 is needed to answer the question of floor crossers in a more immediate fashion?

I look forward to your thoughts on this complicated issue. Let me know what you think by taking the related poll at www.blakerichards.ca.

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