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GLOBE EDITORIAL

The Fair Elections Act: Kill this bill

The Globe and Mail

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The return of Parliament on Monday means a return to the fight over Bill C-23, the Fair Elections Act. For the opposition, it's a chance to hold the bill up to scrutiny and ridicule, and to hold up its passage. For the government, it's an opportunity to admit error and change course. This bill deserves to die.

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(What is the Fair Elections Act? Read The Globe and Mail's easy explanation)

How bad is the legislation? This newspaper recently took the unprecedented step of publishing a five-part series of editorials on it, and the ways in which it will harm the foundation of our democracy. As a group of academics put it in an open letter released last week, if this bill becomes law it will, "undermine the integrity of the Canadian electoral process, diminish the effectiveness of Elections Canada, reduce voting rights, expand the role of money in politics and foster partisan bias in election administration." Unfortunately, that's an accurate summary.

One of the most effective critics of the legislation has been the Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Mayrand; in diplomatic language, he's repeatedly eviscerated the bill. In response, the government has suggested that his opposition is somehow born of bias or even self-interest. Nonsense. The self-interested act of partisanship is the bill itself; the government's push to hustle it through is the danger.

The government has touted the bill's changes to voting rules as needed to prevent voter fraud. That's a red herring. There is no evidence that vouching, a process the bill eliminates, led to widespread fraud. The government has resorted to defending itself with out of context citations from experts, whose conclusions are the opposite of what the government pretends. Tightening the rules will prevent many eligible Canadians from voting; those affected are

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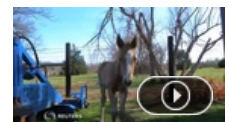
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mostly not Conservative voters.

Other changes create a giant, partisan loophole in campaign spending laws, to the advantage of the Conservatives. Why? The bill gives incumbent parties in each riding the power to name key election officials, instead of leaving the job to an impartial Elections Canada. Why? Bill C-23 also takes direct aim at Elections Canada in other ways – neutering its ability to conduct public outreach campaigns and encourage voting. Why? It also meddles with Elections Canada’s ability to investigate wrongdoing or communicate the results of investigations. Why?

The Fair Elections Act must be stopped. Killing it should be Parliament’s first order of business.

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