

Liberal MPs concerned about PMO's handling of electoral reform and cash-for-access issues, say Grit sources



Democratic Institutions Minister Karina Gould, pictured left last week at the House Affairs Committee with the PCO's Ian McCowan. The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright

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Liberal MPs are generally not worried about the effects of the broken electoral-reform campaign promise on their re-election chances by itself, and most are glad the “divisive” issue has now been put aside, but some are concerned about how Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his top advisers have handled this and other recent controversies, such as the cash-for-access issue, sources told The Hill Times.

“I think there is an increasing view that we’re not handling these issues properly,” said one Liberal insider who did not want to be identified. “The thing you have to remember is that everybody in politics thinks they’re the best at it. So you’ve got a caucus over there that are of that mindset, watching, and I think legitimately thinking, ‘What were we thinking here? What was going on here? What’s our strategy here in QP? It doesn’t seem to be working on the cash-for-access stuff.’”

Most people close to the Liberal Party say the government’s broken promise on electoral reform alone isn’t going to lose them the next election, but at least one source close to the party said it’s one of many things that have the Grit caucus nervous about where things are headed.

One Liberal insider, who asked not to be named, said he does not think Liberal MPs—even those who aggressively campaigned on this issue—will lose their seats in the next election because of electoral reform—or rather a lack thereof. But he said Liberal MPs could lose ridings if voters

see a clear pattern of the Liberal government breaking promises made in the last campaign.

Another individual with connections to the federal Liberals, who spoke to The Hill Times on a non-attribution basis, said the government probably did some number-crunching and determined that electoral reform was not going to be an element that hurts them significantly in the next election. Among the reasons for this, he said, is that the Conservatives probably won’t focus on it because they are happy with the first-past-the-post system.

This person said there were likely a number of potential NDP and Green Party votes that went to the Liberals because of the promise on electoral reform. He said he doesn’t think the issue by itself will cost the Liberals the next election, but it could cause problems when combined with other controversies, including bigger-than-promised deficits and cash-for-access fundraisers.

“All these little things add up,” he said. “It’s not the one big thing.”

This same source said he’s had conversations with MPs who indicate there is growing concern within the Liberal caucus about how Prime Minister Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) is handling various controversies, and the decision to kill electoral reform just adds to this.

However, another Liberal source said an “overwhelming majority” of caucus supports the government’s decision to change direction on

electoral reform because it was too “divisive” and a “distraction” from other issues, such as the economy and international trade. The source said Liberal MPs are happy that the government made the decision now rather than wait any longer and didn’t want to waste anymore political capital.

Prime Minister Trudeau offered his first detailed explanation on Friday, Feb. 10, at a town hall in Yellowknife, N.W.T., on why he broke his electoral reform promise. Taking full responsibility for breaking the promise, he said reforming Canada’s electoral system was not in the best interest of the country right now. He said he prefers a ranked ballot system, but also realized this process would benefit the Liberal Party and thought better of it.

“I’m not going near it,” he said at the town hall. “I’m not going to do something that everyone is convince is going to favour one party over another.”

He said that changing the electoral process would be too divisive right now and he also wanted to get it right.

“I know people will be disappointed. This was my choice to make and I chose it will full consequences of the cost that is possibly going to come to it. But I will not compromise on what is in the best interest of Canada.”

Jack Siegel, a Toronto lawyer who specializes in electoral law and who’s worked for the Liberals on several occasions, said electoral reform is not a big enough concern of the general public to play a big role in the next election.

“I know one or two people for whom electoral reform was the ballot issue,” he said. “I know a few thousand people. I really can’t imagine that it swung anything more than a trivial numbers of votes.”

Still, an e-petition on the Parliament of Canada website that calls on the government to recommit to electoral reform had received about 100,000 signatures as of late last week, the most of any petition on the website.

Liberal sources told The Hill Times that they had the feeling by the time the House adjourned for the Christmas break in December that the government would not be able to deliver on the promise of electoral reform. They said there were a number of reasons for failing to keep this promise, including a lack of consensus among Canadians, concern about a potentially divisive referendum campaign, and worries about the emergence of alt-right, fringe, single issue, or regional parties holding the balance of power in the House if a proportional-representation system was implemented.

One person with Liberal connections said he thinks the government ditched the idea of electoral reform the moment it won a majority government in October 2015. This person said the Liberals probably never thought they would have to fulfil this promise, given how unlikely a majority-government win seemed when the pledge was made.

“All signs were saying that the best they could have hoped for would be in [official] opposition,” this person said. “I don’t think they ever, ever, in their wildest dreams, thought there were going to end up with a majority government.”

Electoral reform became part of the Liberal platform on June 16, 2015, when the party released a position paper that said: “We are committed to ensuring that 2015 will be the last federal election conducted under the first-past-the-post voting system.”

According to Threehundredeight.com, which tracks political surveys across the country, the Liberals were running in third place in June 2015, based on an average of polls that month. The NDP was leading with 32.6 per cent support, having gained 4.1 points since May. The Conservatives were second with 28.6 per cent, having gained 1.6 points since the previous month. The Liberals had lost 2.1 points and were down to 26.3 per cent. Threehundredeight.com says June 2015 marked their worst showing for the Liberals since before Mr. Trudeau became leader in 2013 and that it was their 11th straight month of “stagnation or decline.”

This person with Liberal ties added that, even if they managed to eke out a minority government, it would not have been realistic to think an electoral-reform package could have been passed, given the co-operation that would have been needed from at least one of the other main parties.

However, he added that given how categorical the promise was, Mr. Trudeau “must have believed it was required. The mistake was setting a hard date around implementation.”

Kelly Carmichael, executive director for Fair Vote Canada, which advocates for proportional representation, said she spoke by telephone with Karina Gould (Burlington, Ont.), who was recently appointed the Democratic Institution minister, the night before the government said it was breaking its promise on electoral reform. She said the minister gave no indication during that call what was to come the next day.

“I had a conversation with her on the 31st [of January] and she said that she wasn’t fully briefed on the [electoral reform] file and needed more time,” she said. “The next morning she just walked up to the mike and killed it.”

Ms. Carmichael said: “I asked her if they were still on track to bring in [electoral-reform] legislation in May, and she told me that she still had to get fully briefed. She couldn’t comment on it because she felt she didn’t have enough information. ... It would appear to me that this decision was made in the PMO, or that she was briefed on it and she just wasn’t telling us.”

Ms. Carmichael said Ms. Gould’s office initiated that phone call. “She reached out to me, and now I’m just not sure why. ... She said she was just reaching out to stakeholders, introducing herself, and that we would all be working together, and she was looking forward to meeting, and she was going to set up a meeting in Ottawa.”

Ms. Carmichael found it “shocking” that the government walked away from electoral reform, though she admitted that there were many “red flags” along the way that this was going to happen.

One thing was the interview Mr. Trudeau did with the French-language newspaper Le Devoir in October 2016 in which he said Canadians were telling him that “now we have a government we sort of like so electoral reform just doesn’t seem as much of a priority anymore.”

Ms. Carmichael said that “was a crazy thing to say, because it was never about him. It was never about who was in charge. It was about giving voters better democracy.”

She said there were signs the government was backing away from electoral reform almost immediately after the 2015 election, as many elected Liberal MPs who were on the record as supporting proportional representation suddenly took a more neutral stance publicly.

She said 43 Liberals who won their seats in the 2015 election, when surveyed by the group before the election, said they supported the principle of the numbers of seats in Parliament reflecting the proportion of votes a party gets.



Liberal MP Kim Rudd says she's hearing from people who oppose and support the government breaking its promise on electoral reform. The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright

Rookie Liberal MP Kim Rudd (Northumberland-Peterborough South, Ont.), who was also among those indicating support for proportional representation in the questionnaire, said in an interview that different MPs found out at different times that the government had decided to ditch plans on electoral reform, though she declined to say when she found out.

She said that since the government made its decision public, she has received communication from 20 to 25 constituents who are unhappy and about 12 who support the government's decision. She added that after the government's announcement, she went to an event attended by about 350 people in the riding and no one mentioned electoral reform.

Ms. Rudd, who won her riding by less than three percentage points in 2015, cited the divisiveness of a referendum—a recommendation of the Special Committee on Electoral Reform—as one reason for stepping away from the promise.

“Some wanted a referendum, some did not want a referendum,” she said. “There was no clear [way forward].”

She declined to say whether she or other Liberals would have difficulty in the next election because of this issue.

Darrell Samson (Sackville-Preston-Chezzetcook, N.S.), another rookie Liberal MP who indicated support for proportional representation to Fair Vote Canada, said he heard from about 20 constituents in the last two weeks who either wanted to discuss this issue with him or who were disappointed that the government backed away from its commitment. He said some MPs might face an uphill battle for re-election in 2019 because of this issue. Mr. Samson declined to specify which MPs might have the toughest times.

“Some will have more challenges than others,” said Mr. Samson, who won the last election by a margin of 13.6 percentage points. “I can't speak for them. They'll have to be honest with their constituents and tell the story as it is, that the value of looking at and changing our system was extremely important, but with no consensus and time running out, we couldn't deliver this time.”

Mr. Siegel said he was “disappointed” the government dropped electoral reform as an objective, but said the circumstances were not right to make it happen.

“It was maddening to see what was happening with that committee, with three parties pulling in three different directions,” Mr. Siegel said.

Despite the Special Committee on Electoral Reform recommending a form of proportional representation “without much meat on the bone” to be put to the public in a referendum, Mr. Siegel said he doesn't blame the government for essentially ignoring this suggestion and dropping the matter altogether.

Most experts that addressed the committee were in favour of a proportional representation system, but Mr. Siegel said there's no indication that the general public wanted such a system. Like the prime minister, Mr. Siegel's preferred option for reform was a preferential-ballot system. Yet, he said because there's no clear consensus among the parties or the public on an alternative voting system, there's little else the government could have done.

“You can't railroad something like this,” he said. “If I count the number of times I screamed bloody murder along with my colleagues when the Conservatives, both federally and 15 years ago in Ontario, just unilaterally started making far less dramatic changes to [electoral law], that's not how you should be doing it.”

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Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi won his riding by one-tenth of a percentage point in 2015, and was on the record as supporting proportional representation. The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright The following cabinet ministers answered this way, according to data shared by Ms. Carmichael: Ms. Gould; former Democratic Institutions minister and now Status of Women Minister Maryam Monsef (Peterborough-Kawartha); Sport Minister Carla Qualtrough (Delta, B.C.); National Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan (Vancouver South, B.C.); Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould (Vancouver Granville, B.C.); Environment Minister Catherine McKenna (Ottawa Centre, Ont.); Agriculture Minister Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, P.E.I.); Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi (Edmonton Mill Woods, Alta.); Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Man.); and Employment Minister Patty Hajdu (Thunder Bay-Superior North, Ont.).

Brook Simpson, a spokesman for Mr. Sohi, acknowledged that the minister did indicate his support for proportional representation, but said that Mr. Sohi added in the questionnaire that he would “advocate for public consultations to amend the elections law and following those consultations I will support the recommendations that result from the public consultations.”

Mr. Simpson added that the electoral reform consultations that happened “showed that there is not the broad support needed for a change of this magnitude.”

Mr. Sohi won his riding by a slim margin in 2015 with 41.2 per cent of the vote compared to 41.1 per cent for Conservative incumbent Tim Uppal. Mr. Simpson did not address the question of whether Mr. Sohi was concerned what the broken promise on electoral reform would mean in the next election.

Liberal MP Karen McCrimmon (Kanata-Carleton, Ont.), among the MPs who answered yes to proportional representation in this survey, said in a letter response to one constituent, posted on Facebook, that said she has received “many letters and emails from concerned constituents” about the Liberals breaking their promise on electoral reform.

“I too am concerned about our current ‘first past the post’ system, and I have been an advocate for reforming our electoral system,” she wrote. “I remain convinced that a system that improves proportional representation is what is needed.”

Liberal MP Kim Rudd says she's hearing from people who oppose and support the government breaking its promise on electoral reform. The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright