

Shifting the Senate

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Not surprisingly, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has reacted sharply to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's proposal to add an elected component to the Senate. As Mr. McGuinty noted, bestowing greater legitimacy on the Senate might lead that body to make greater use of its powers, and since the chamber of sober second thought is a regionally representative body rather than one based on representation by population, Ontario voters would be the losers. While Ontarians constitute 40 per cent of the people in Canada, the province has only 22 per cent of the Senate seats. "So to elect senators in Canada under the existing system would serve both to entrench and exacerbate an existing inequality," he said Thursday night.

Mr. McGuinty went so far as to say he would rather see the Senate abolished than have that happen or, failing that, would prefer to see senators elected on the basis of one person, one vote. "But if we did that, then we'd have two rep-by-population houses and one would be redundant." Mr. McGuinty understates the case. Having two elected bodies with almost identical powers would invite gridlock, and throw a spanner into the arrangement that has prevailed since Confederation: that the government executive -- the cabinet, led by the prime minister -- is based in the Commons, a fact reflected in the constitutional stipulation that the Senate can't introduce money bills.

As we wrote here recently, Mr. Harper's ad hoc proposal has other shortcomings. It's one thing for provincial voters to elect a candidate (through whatever means) and for the Prime Minister to appoint that person to the Senate, but the Constitution stipulates that senators are appointed until age 75. Even if the Prime Minister were to dream up a different term, how would he guarantee that a senator would respect it, short of amending the Constitution, which Mr. Harper has said he won't do? The Senate would be no more democratic, but might feel more emboldened to throw its undemocratic weight around. The Ontario Premier is right to throw cold water on Mr. Harper's plan.