

THIS IS SENATE REFORM?

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With the appointment of five more senators on Friday, the Conservatives now have a working majority in the upper chamber. That, of course, is the reason that Prime Minister Stephen Harper has abandoned his previous stance against appointed (as opposed to elected) senators and named no fewer than 32 men and women to the chamber over the past year, all of them sympathetic to his cause.

“The opposition have abused their Senate majority by obstructing and eviscerating law-and-order measures that are urgently needed and strongly supported by Canadians,” said the Prime Minister in announcing the appointments.

But the blame for the latest obstruction lies with Harper himself, not the Senate, for it is he who prorogued Parliament after Christmas, thereby killing the anti-crime legislation that was before the Senate and ensuring that it will not be passed for many more months.

And while the Senate has, indeed, exercised its prerogative to give the government’s anti-crime bills “a sober second look,” that’s because the supine opposition in the House of Commons (afraid of being labelled “soft on crime”) failed to do its job. Now that Harper has the Senate as well as the Commons under his thumb, any effective scrutiny of the anti-crime bills has been removed.

The Prime Minister may even be able to push through a Senate reform bill, placing term limits on senators and laying the groundwork for them to be elected. But in this respect, he will likely find that the courts present a major roadblock to any unilateral efforts to change the Senate without the consent of the provinces.

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