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Overseas military personnel now free to march to ballot box

By Tim Dunne

Members of Canada's military have always recognized that there were some inequities between the members of the military community and the rest of the Canadian population. These were frequently met with the quip, "We are here to defend democracy, not practise it."

While the right to vote is the most fundamental right under Canadian law, members of the Canadian Armed Forces were not always able to cast their ballots.

Voting in federal elections and byelections is an entrenched right and is accomplished using an absentee ballot. Military members assigned to a ship or deployed to a mission such as Afghanistan or humanitarian assistance or disaster relief in Haiti, retain their Nova Scotia addresses, so were qualified to vote in provincial and municipal elections.

But these families faced an entirely different set of circumstances if the posting was outside Canada for an extended period. When assigned to a Canadian embassy, NATO, or at one of the alliance's facilities for three to four years, military members and their family members move from their Nova Scotia residences and store their furniture and effects until they return to Canada.

Without a Nova Scotia address, they were not eligible to vote in provincial and municipal elections even though they paid taxes to both the federal and provincial governments. This "taxation without representation" was what led the United States' founding fathers to ultimately declare independence from Britain.

Last year, the Nova Scotia government changed the rules. In the next election, Canadian Armed Forces members and DND civilian employees serving outside Canada who meet the new residency requirements will be able vote.

With the change in the Elections Act, military or civilian personnel and their family members who have lived in Nova Scotia for at least six months prior to departure or deployment and intend to return to the province at the end of the duty, assignment, course or deployment, are able to vote in a Nova Scotia election or byelection. The civic address of their residence prior to departure will determine the individual's electoral district.

Voting is by write-in ballot and the process begins with a write-in ballot application, available online or by email from Elections Nova Scotia.

The completed application is returned by mail, email or facsimile.

If the application is approved, the appropriate returning officer will forward a write-in ballot kit by the fastest available means. The voter writes the name of the registered political party or the candidate, or both, on the write-in ballot. The ballot uses a special system of envelopes designed to protect the secrecy of the vote. The completed ballot must be received at the local returning office by the end of voting on election day.

Richard P. Temporale, Nova Scotia's Chief Electoral Officer, recommends that military and civilian members of DND and the Canadian Armed Forces keep in touch with family and friends to learn about upcoming provincial elections, and check the Elections Nova Scotia website (<http://electionsnovascotia.ca/>) for information on an announced election and additional information on

how to vote by write-in ballot.

The days of “taxation without representation” are finally over and our military and their civilian colleagues can practise democracy, as well as defend it.

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