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Hope for votes springs from 250th anniversary

Speaker distressed to see decline in interest in civic responsibilities

By DAVID JACKSON Provincial Reporter

Celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of representative government in Canada could help revive Canadians' flagging interest in voting and participating in the democracy, House of Commons Speaker Peter Milliken said in Halifax Wednesday.

Mr. Milliken said it's distressing to see declining voter turnouts in provincial and federal elections.

"We must instil in our citizens a sense that obligations and duties go hand in hand with the cherished rights that we enjoy as a people," he said in his address at Province House.

Mr. Milliken and other politicians, veterans and current military personnel were at the legislature for the launch of the Democracy 250 project. Nova Scotia was home to the first parliamentary democracy in Canada, in 1758.

Former premiers Russell MacLellan and John Hamm are co-chairmen of Democracy 250. Mr. Hamm said Wednesday's event, months in advance of the anniversary, was a way for people to start making people aware of the milestone.

The chairmen said schools, heritage sites, legions and community halls will be focal points for the celebrations.

Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay, the Central Nova MP and Nova Scotia's voice in the federal cabinet, talked about Nova Scotia's great gift of developing democracy in Canada and said democratic development is a central priority of Canada's foreign policy.

"Afghanistan, of course, is a very special case on the democratic front and it is our leading foreign policy priority, and fostering democracy is central to our efforts there," Mr. MacKay said. "We are opposing the forces of violence, intolerance and oppression in Afghanistan."

Premier Rodney MacDonald said MLAs are proud to be able to come to historic Province House and know this province is the birthplace of parliamentary democracy in Canada.

MLAs are planning to set up a committee to find out why Nova Scotians aren't as interested in voting as they once were and what can be done to reverse the trend. Mr. MacDonald agreed to a Liberal demand for such a committee last July.

Mr. Hamm said his committee expects the provincial and federal government will make contributions, plus there will be private fundraising.

"The province is handling the administrative side, and it'll be upwards of \$1 million," he said. "We're asking the federal government through ACOA and through Heritage Canada

for a \$5-million contribution."

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