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Poor voter turnout blamed on education

Canada's chief electoral officer says some provinces neglect history and civics in schools and see a decline in young people going to vote.

By Ron Ryder
The Guardian

Education systems that neglect history and civics could be to blame for the declining youth voting rate, according to Canada's chief electoral officer.

Jean-Pierre Kingsley visited Prince Edward Island this week to speak to the 2006 conference of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada.

In a meeting with the editorial board of The Guardian, Kingsley said he has been concerned about a general tendency of young Canadians to vote less regularly than their elders.

He said that since the 1980s there has been a trend in which people who have already voted continue to do so, but relatively fewer people sign up to vote when they become eligible.

"In many provincial jurisdictions we neglect history, we neglect courses in



Jean-Pierre Kingsley, chief electoral officer of Canada, said he thinks youth voting rates have been hurt by provincial education systems that fail to school young people in history and civics. He is on the Island this week for the Institute of Public Administration of Canada convention. (GUARDIAN PHOTO BY HEATHER TAWEEL)

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civics. Young people aren't apathetic, they're engaged in other civic endeavours. They aren't cynical. They are at an age when they are idealistic and buoyant," he said.

"What has been lacking, for many of them, is an education as to why it is so important that they do vote."

Kingsley said he saw a slight improvement in the last federal election.

He said Elections Canada made a concerted effort to reach young people prior to the last vote, placing ads on the Internet and inserting promotional videos among the commercials and trailers played at movie theatres. The agency wants to show young people that they can shape government and effect history, it also wants to make it as easy as possible for young people to be registered as voters.

"Once they start to connect they buy in," Kingsley said.

Kingsley said he sees no problem using emerging technologies like the Internet to encourage voting and inform electors.

He said he wouldn't be opposed to going so far as allowing Internet-based voting provided he could ensure the vote was limited to one ballot per person, that identities were verifiable and non-transferable and that the voting was recorded in a way that would allow for a recount.

"The first time someone shows me a gizmo that will meet all of our requirements for a vote, I'll use it . . . But I don't have that gizmo yet," he said. "The first time it will not be used by many people, the second time it will. It will go very fast."

But Kingsley said the standard that must always be kept up is one that ensures votes are collected fairly, that the process is carried out with integrity and that the public can be confident in the integrity of its ballot.

"If they don't think that what comes out in the count is what went into the box, you've got yourself an issue."

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