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OTTAWA—Here is the first harsh truth of the 41st federal election campaign in Canada: You can't believe anything that the politicians — of any stripe — are saying about coalition governments. Feel free to ignore it all.

It is not true, as Conservatives allege, that coalitions are evil, damaging or treasonous plots against the stability of the federation. It is also not true, as Liberals and New Democrats allege, that the idea of a coalition government hasn't entered their minds if the next election result is unclear.

There are, actually, two conversations currently underway about the possibility of a coalition government in Canada after the votes are counted in early May.



The historic accord signed by NPP Leader Jack Layton, then Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe in late 2008 aroused anxiety among many Canadians about what a coalition government would mean to them.

Rene Johnston/Toronto Star

If it helps, think of it as a holiday dinner gathering. The noise from the political campaign is the kids' table, complete with the shrieking and the hurled objects. The other, adult conversation is being conducted quietly, sensibly and soberly — deliberately away from the political fray.

The adults involved in those talks include some of Canada's leading thinkers on constitutional law and the formation of government, and they started their conversation early in February, at the [David Asper Centre for Constitutional Rights](#), at the University of Toronto.

Their goal is to come up with an instruction manual to guide the country when and if an election produces an unclear result — a chart for uncharted territory.

Other countries, such as Britain and New Zealand, have such manuals, and that's largely why you didn't see political hysteria in those nations when it came time to hammer out a government out of hung parliaments after their elections.

Peter Russell, the eminent and amiable constitutional scholar from the University of Toronto, has largely been spearheading the adult conversation. He explains that cool heads have to prevail in this whole discussion: Canada's system of government is too important to become a mere political football.

It's merely sensible preparation for an unclear election result, in case it happens, Russell explains. "At that point, the manual could be very, very helpful because it explains what's expected of the political leaders and sort of sets out a process that everyone can understand and follow."

A how-to manual for sorting out unclear election results would have two other important benefits, Russell says.

First, it would keep the Governor General from having to become a political referee — the awkward position in which Michaëlle Jean found herself during the so-called "coalition crisis" of 2008, shortly after the last election, when Stephen Harper's new Conservative government was nearly toppled by a coalition deal hammered out by the Liberals and New Democrats, with the support of the Bloc Québécois.

Second, Russell says, an instruction manual would have a calming effect on a nervous public, whipped up by political actors into frenzied speculation about the fate of the government. Largely as a product of over-the-top Conservative rhetoric in late 2008, a good section of the Canadian public was convinced that a coalition government — even the mere idea of one — was illegal, unethical and probably dangerous.

In previous interviews, Russell has said he'd never forget the image of political partisans lining the streets near the Governor General's residence, waving placards denouncing coalitions with extreme, inflammatory language. He'd like to avoid a repeat of that spin war, in which truths about parliamentary government got twisted dangerously out of shape.

Russell says the public should know "what the fundamental rules of the game are." As well, the media should have a handbook of sorts, so that they're not relying on that misleading political rhetoric to inform Canadian citizens about coalition formation.

If the constitutional scholars and experts do their jobs properly, Russell says, they'll come up with a document that is "politically consensual

and publicly accessible.”

The participants in the first discussion included Russell and his fellow constitutional experts Peter Hogg and C.E.S. (Ned) Franks, representatives of the Governor General and the House of Commons, as well as people with arm's length connections to the political parties. Those political people included: Tom Flanagan, former chief of staff for Stephen Harper, former Liberal cabinet minister and interim leader Bill Graham, and Brian Topp, former national NDP campaign director and author of a book on the 2008 “coalition crisis.” Daniel Turp, a former Bloc Québécois MP now at the Université de Montréal, was also present.

The group has deliberately kept its efforts under the radar, but further meetings are to be held, with even more participants and experts gathered up by the Public Policy Forum think-tank in Ottawa. The discussions to date have all been off the record, but will continue this month, even as the election campaign is underway.

So far, according to the report of the first meeting in February, there is widespread agreement on the need for a manual, but less consensus on what exactly should be in the document.

“There would be much less risk of a parliamentary crisis following an election in which the result is not clear if there were an authoritative set of guidelines such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom have in their cabinet manuals,” the report states in its conclusions.

It took political will to create those guidelines, the report notes. In Britain, for instance, former prime minister Gordon Brown had the foresight in 2009 to anticipate a possible hung Parliament after the next election, and authorized work to begin on a manual for coalition formation, just in case. That work was carried out by the Constitution Unit at University College, London and the Institute for Government in that country.

Robert Hazell, head of University College's Constitution Unit, was actually present at the February conference in Toronto too, to give Canadians the [benefit of his experience and a speech on lessons learned](#).

Hazell told the Canadians that the sober, systematic process of writing a manual and getting it into the process was helpful in averting “wild speculation” — somewhat similar to the sort we're seeing in Canada during this election campaign.

“In the months leading up to the election there had been stories in the press of the chaos that would ensue if there were a hung Parliament, and speculation about the role of the Queen,” Hazell wrote in a paper prepared for the Toronto conference. “The draft elections chapter helped explained what would happen, and put paid to most of the wild speculation.”

Hazell also pointed out that the manual took the pressure off the political actors in the drama too, essentially giving them a script to follow.

Russell is hoping that a conversation like this in Canada would produce the same effect. In the meantime, it's probably wise to ignore the kids' shenanigans in the current election campaign and pay closer attention to the evolving conversation at the adults' table.