

Minority government the new normal?

BY RICHARD FOOT, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 1, 2011



Conservative leader and Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivers a speech during a rally in Burnaby, British Columbia March 27, 2011. Canadians will head to the polls in a federal election May 2.

Photograph by: CHRIS WATTIE, REUTERS

'There is a blue door. There is a red door,' said Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, explaining — as if he'd stepped out of a time machine — the two apparent choices facing voters at the start of the federal election campaign.

But the truth is there will be countless options for Canadians on the ballot this spring, and at least four parties — five if the Green Party ekes out a win — will capture seats in the next Parliament. Just as they have in the past.

Canada's "pizza parliament" was an exotic anomaly when it first appeared, after the Reform party and the Bloc Québécois won seats in the 1993 election.

The House of Commons, for years the exclusive domain of two or three major parties, had suddenly mutated into a cacophony of political colours and competing voices. But what seemed almost alien then is now a familiar fact of life for most Canadians, hardly raising eyebrows anymore.

As the country prepares a return to the polls, it's worth noting how much else has changed in the political life of the nation; how in recent years, our perception of what's normal and acceptable in federal politics has undergone a quiet but radical transformation.

Take Stephen Harper himself. In his first three election campaigns as a national party leader, Harper was at pains not to utter the word "majority government," knowing that many Canadians worried he might unleash a secret social conservative agenda if given free reign over the levers of power.

Today, after more than five years in office and a legacy of big-spending, centrist policies, Harper knows that Canadians have grown accustomed to his leadership and his style.

Whether or not voters like him, many no longer fear him. And for the first time in a national campaign, Harper is making a loud appeal for a majority government on election day.

"I would like to have a majority," he said, without hesitation, on the opening day of the campaign. How times change.

Yet while Harper and other leaders chafe at the prospect of ongoing minority governments, it appears most Canadians no longer do.

Minorities were once rare occurrences in Parliament, but they've become a constant reality since 2004 and voters appear to have grown comfortable with them.

A survey of more than 2,000 voters, conducted last fall for the Public Policy Forum, an Ottawa think-tank, showed that a majority of respondents (55 per cent) felt the minority parliaments of the past seven years have performed effectively overall.

The survey also found no consensus on whether the preceding period of majority parliaments from 1980-2004 served the country any better than the minorities that followed.

So common are minorities today that more than two-thirds of all sitting MPs in the most recent House of Commons had never experienced a majority Parliament.

The same is true of Canadians who came of voting age after 2004. For millions of young citizens, minorities are the only kind federal politics they know.

“We’re living in some pretty interesting times — the longest period of minority parliaments in our history,” says David Mitchell, president of the Public Policy Forum.

“Canadians by and large have learned to live with minority parliaments to a much greater extent than our politicians have. They want to see our members of Parliament work together more effectively, but the issue of minority versus majority isn’t significant in people’s minds as one being superior or inferior.”

We’ve also learned to live with a political system where leaders and their parties think small.

In the past, politicians fought over big ideas, or pursued national projects, or debated significant issues in Parliament. Lester Pearson, with only a minority government at his disposal, laid the foundations of the social welfare system, including the Canadian Pension Plan and universal health insurance. Pierre Trudeau patriated the Constitution and enacted the Charter of Rights. Brian Mulroney brought in free trade. Jean Chrétien, despite a reputation as a caretaker prime minister, wrestled down the deficit.

Bold, national projects were once commonplace in federal politics and voters expected big ideas from their leaders. Not anymore.

Stéphane Dion tried to campaign on a big idea in the 2008 election, but the Liberals’ Green Shift plan contributed to his undoing. Not only was it poorly explained, it arrived at a time when ideas in politics have simply gone out of fashion.

“When is the last time that our federal Parliament had a real debate, say, about whether our deteriorating environment or a few hundred refugees pose the greater security threat? Or how we ensure universal access to quality health care with our aging population? Or how to reform the tax system so that it promotes both efficiency and equity and is inter-generationally fair? You pick the issue,” says Alex Himelfarb, a former clerk of the Privy Council, in a recent posting on his blog.

Former prime minister Kim Campbell provoked anger and criticism in 1993 for suggesting that election campaigns were no place to discuss issues and ideas.

But which major party leader dares to campaign on a big idea today? We’ve grown accustomed to a politics of increments, where parties court carefully segmented blocks of voters not with bold plans or visions, but with minor tax payoffs and boutique enticements.

A week into the election campaign, have any of the major parties produced a comprehensive policy? Instead, voters have been promised a family-friendly tax cut by the Tories, new money for students and young parents from the Liberals and a cap on credit-card rates by the NDP. What’s more, few Canadians seem to be clamouring for anything more.

“We’re living in a time where there’s been a reassessment of the role of government in the lives of citizens, where the current governing party has been very deliberate in its focus of not developing any new, large national programs, but to be focusing on an incremental basis, issue by issue,” says Mitchell.

“I don’t think it’s a trend that can or will continue. There are simply too many pressing national areas that require at the very least a co-ordinating role on the part of the federal government, and that require an answer to the question of who speaks for Canada,” he said.

“On the energy file, on the health file or the international trade file, it cannot be simply a laissez-faire approach where every province can do their own thing on an unco-ordinated basis. It’s affecting our competitiveness.”

As political leadership shrinks, so does the importance of Parliament itself.

The average number of sitting days of the House of Commons has fallen from 150-160 per year during the 1950s, '60s and '70s to barely 100 per year since 2004.

Fewer bills are now passed, there are fewer debates in the chamber and, as parliamentary expert Ned Franks has observed, parliamentary productivity is hampered by “relentless warfare, obstruction and delay.”

As Parliament has declined, so too has public tolerance and patience with one of its central roles — determining who has the constitutional right to govern.

Traditional Westminster rules say whichever party commands the confidence of the Commons should form the government. However, when the majority opposition tried to create a coalition government after the 2008 election, many Canadians were outraged by the idea.

This year the Conservatives are playing on similar sentiments, raising the spectre of an opposition coalition as a monstrous possibility.

Yet coalition governments were once widely accepted in Canada. Conservative prime minister Robert Borden governed through a formal coalition during the First World War, and there have been numerous provincial examples — as well as informal power-sharing arrangements during minority governments — in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Ontario.

As a measure of how much the political culture has changed, our comfort level with coalitions is a glaring example. Where once coalitions were legitimate tools, a means of securing order and co-operation out of minority parliaments, today coalition has become a dirty word.

"I think there's a lot of wilful misinterpretation and mischief on this that is deeply unfortunate," says Mitchell. "I don't think the public really understands today, as it once did, that it's up to Parliament to decide who gets to govern."

"There's nothing wrong with a coalition. It's perfectly acceptable, and accepted throughout the Commonwealth."

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