

Should we give coalition politics a chance?

Canadians not used to concept

By PETER McKENNA

Even with repeated denials by Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, Prime Minister Stephen Harper continues to harp on about the "dangerous" and "reckless" coalition. While it is true that NDP leader Jack Layton has certainly not dismissed this possibility outright — especially if the governing Conservatives get re-elected with an even slimmer minority of seats on May 2 — the federal Liberals have emphatically torpedoed any such talk.

Still, Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe is talking openly about the prospect of a post-election coalition, and indicated his willingness to work with such an arrangement (but with no formal participation in it, of course).

To be sure, the Harper Conservatives are regularly circulating talking points to their candidates that refer disparagingly to the "coalition opposition." And you can expect to hear more about the evil coalition from Stephen Harper — the chief architect of this strategy — as the election campaign unfolds in the weeks ahead.

But will the Liberals and New Democrats, the most likely partners, be emboldened by their enmity toward Harper (and perhaps the ongoing British experiment) to form such an arrangement? First up, though, is the pivotal question of whether Canadians are ready to accept coalition politics at all.

Indeed, this raises another interesting question: should federal political parties — either shortly before or in the dying days of the election campaign — clearly articulate their intentions to form a coalition in the event that the final seat or constituency numbers make it feasible?

In any event, prior to Confederation, coalitions were formed in the British colonies, including the "Great Coalition" of 1864-67. But the literature, such as it is, posits that the only case of coalition government at the federal level was the so-called Robert Borden-Wilfrid Laurier "Union government" of 1917. That was a coalition of Conservatives and Liberals and it was largely built around the thorny conscription issue of the First World War, and it lasted for just over a year.

Coalitions have also existed at the provincial level in Canada (in Manitoba and British Columbia in the 1930s and 1940s) — namely, the Ontario Liberal-NDP pact (which lasted for roughly two years) of the mid-1980s and the Saskatchewan NDP-Liberal arrangement (which lasted its full term) of the late 1990s. This admittedly thin record of coalition governments does not suggest a huge appetite for them in Canada.

Of course, the December 2008 coalition agreement of the Liberals and NDP, if public opinion surveys were any indication, landed with a big thud. Why?

The simple answer is: because we're not used to coalition governments in Canada. We just don't have any recent experience or familiarity with coalitions at the federal level. Additionally, our aversion may also have something to do with the British parliamentary practice of narrowly viewing Parliament as a government and an official opposition comprised of single political parties.

Part of the explanation may also stem from the traditional or parochial nature of our political culture — that is, a predilection to shun too much change or to countenance unfamiliar political terrain. It may also be the case that parties forming a minority government believe that they can still govern as if they operate a majority government.

While it may be true that a coalition arrangement would bring more stability initially, there is certainly no guarantee that political posturing and manoeuvring would suddenly disappear. In fact, political machinations might even become more pronounced and even impede "good government" — as the coalition faced internal party struggles, sharp policy differences, and the constant search for electoral advantage.

Other parties, especially third or smaller parties, often fear that joining a coalition government could have disastrous implications for them in the next federal election. Moreover, the media have done little to educate us on the merits of coalitions — particularly when you consider their inability to properly explain the legitimacy of the 2008 coalition agreement between Stéphane Dion and Jack Layton.

But what if Canadians did acquire some experience with a coalition government, would all our initial apprehensions simply melt away? Would we come to not only live with those coalitions, but learn to love them as well?

Perhaps it is true that the idea of coalitions won't catch on in Canada in the short term. But we know from recent electoral experience that minority governments are likely going to be the norm in the immediate future.

So, if there is another razor-thin election outcome in May, would we be better off with a coalition government or another slim minority government? That will probably depend on whether Canadians are prepared to take a leap of faith, to discard their fear of the unknown, and to give coalition politics a chance.

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