

Minorities work fine — under better leadership

BY DAN GARDNER, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 27, 2011



Stephen Harper is shown in front of his campaign plane on April 9, 2011.

Photograph by: Chris Wattie, Reuters

OTTAWA — Other countries have founding myths featuring prison breaks, rebellions, wars, and all manner of bloodshed. But not this country. The central event in the story of Canada's founding was a conference.

Participants sat at a table. They talked. They negotiated and compromised. The most violent act was an especially vigorous shaking of hands.

This goes some way to explaining why Canada is one of the world's most successful and boring countries. It also underscores the absurdity of the status quo in federal politics.

The last Parliament was broken. About that there is universal agreement. Indeed, it's the basis of the Conservative campaign: Stephen Harper insists that only a Conservative majority can end the "bickering" and endless elections and get things done.

Lots of people agree, at least about the desirability of majority government. Majority is normal, they feel. Majority is stable. After a string of minorities, each more rancorous and dysfunctional than the last, a majority is the only thing that can pull Parliament out of the quagmire and deliver effective government.

This is not an unreasonable view. But it's wrong. Starting with its basic premise.

Minority governments are not some strange and unfortunate aberration. One survey of democratic governments in western Europe and the British Commonwealth between 1945 and 1987 found that 87 per cent did not feature a single governing party in control of a majority of seats. They were minorities, in other words.

Within Canada, the first federal minority government was formed in 1921. Since then, there have been 27 governments, 13 of which were minorities.

Most of these minority governments were nowhere near as rancorous and dysfunctional as the last Parliament. Some functioned brilliantly. The minorities of Lester Pearson had partisan clashes and scandals — they all do — but they were among the most productive in history.

The story is the same internationally. Name a peaceful, prosperous, well-governed country and chances are you have named a country in which minority governments are the norm.

Germany. Sweden. Netherlands. New Zealand.

Minority governments routinely work well.

Oddly enough, even Stephen Harper has demonstrated this point.

The first year of Harper's first minority government functioned well. The prime minister won the support of the NDP on the budget, the Liberals on Afghanistan, and the Bloc Quebecois on issues related to federalism.

The watershed was Stephane Dion becoming Liberal leader. That was when Harper sensed his opportunity for a majority had come and his style of governance changed radically.

Out went decorum, respect and negotiation. In came insults, stonewalling and brinkmanship.

The Opposition contributed to fractiousness — recall the new Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff declaring the prime minister to be "on probation" — but historians will heap the lion's share of the blame on Stephen Harper. The petty and pointless provocations. The how-to manual on obstructing committees. The constant refusal to deliver documents demanded by the House of Commons. The historic speakers' rulings. The even more historic contempt verdict.

It's a dismal record. Perhaps worst of all were the attack ads: A prime minister who sincerely intends to work with an Opposition leader does not publicly and viciously insult the man he will shake hands with over the negotiating table.

So what next? Stephen Harper wants his majority and he still may get it. But most polls to date suggest he will fall short and Harper has warned that if that happens, there will be instability, maybe even another election. Which is probably correct. And certainly ridiculous.

In the last Conservative budget, the gap between what the NDP asked for its support and what the Conservatives offered was tiny and so a new Conservative minority could make modest concessions to the NDP, pass the budget, and get on with governing.

But Harper has already said his government will reintroduce the budget without changes, which suggests this simple bit of negotiation and compromise won't happen. And we will get the instability the prime minister predicted.

Why? It's not a defect inherent in minority government. Nor is it that the big three parties have irreconcilable visions and policies. In fact, the substantive disagreements between the parties are as small or smaller than they've ever been in modern times.

No, the problem is the leader. Stephen Harper gambled everything on winning a majority. Now, after swearing that anything less would cause earth to shudder and sky to weep, it would be personally calamitous if a Conservative minority government functioned smoothly.

Harper said there would be instability, damn it. And he will make sure of it.

It may not come to that, fortunately.

It's likely the Liberals will be under new management soon, which should help blow away some of the animosity hanging in the air over Parliament Hill.

But what would make all the difference is a new Conservative leader, which is possible. Having tried and failed four times to win a majority — including twice against the weakest Liberal leaders in modern history — Stephen Harper may decide it is time for a career change. Or Conservatives may decide it for him.

And new leaders may get a chance to show they have a better appreciation of this country's proudest political tradition.

dgardner@ottawacitizen.com

[Twitter.com/dgardner](https://twitter.com/dgardner)

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