



## **Wanted: New Political Party?**

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So here we go again. For the fourth time in seven years we're going back to the polls to elect a 'new' New Government of Canada. Excited?

The Government was defeated on an opposition motion of apparent principle that found it in contempt of Parliament. It lost the vote because the Government's budget buy-off of the NDP wasn't large enough. The NDP was a bit like the hooker claiming insult by an offer of \$50 and saying, "do you think I'm a whore?" To which her potential client says, "We've already established that. Now we're just negotiating on price." It was a wonderful start to the silly season and a fitting end to one of Canada's least remarkable and least productive Parliamentary sessions.

A fitting charge against the Government might have been its stunning ineffectiveness in terms of its ability to get Bills passed into legislation. Since 2006, when the Harper Government took power, only 42% of the bills introduced, 117 of 279, have been passed compared to Lester Pearson's minority government which successfully passed 85% of its legislative agenda. A lot of that has to do with the Government's political tactics including prorogation, fewer days in which Parliament sits, the poisonous partisanship, the subversion of the committee process, and its obsession with secrecy and information control. But even then, it is likely we'll hear all sorts of criticism in the next six weeks of much of the legislation that was passed, despite the support it received from opposition parties to pass it. The level of duplicity present on all sides is staggering.

There has been widespread discussion of late of the dysfunction of Parliament. Some commentators like Macleans' Andrew Coyne have floated the idea of [a new political party](#) that draws from the base of both conservatives and liberals. However, it is not a new party that is needed but a new political culture and a new organizing metaphor for governing this country. The Canadian Westminster system has outlived its usefulness. It's way past its 'best before date', it's in urgent need of replacement and it's at serious risk of becoming a cancerous burden on Canadian democracy.

What should be obvious to all is that successive governments (both Liberal and Conservative) have felt less and less compulsion to represent all Canadians. They are increasingly content to represent small slices of the Canadian population and to cherry pick which ones as it suits them. I overheard one senior political operative exclaiming this past summer, his party is confident that they will receive support from at least 30% of the voting public (that's roughly 18% of Canadians) on any given issue. As for the rest of Canadians – the other 82% -- they don't really care. Their allegiance is to their supporters, period.

To even the casual observer Canada is a place of many diverse communities – urban and rural; westerners and east-coasters; French and English; rich and poor; aboriginal and non-aboriginal; immigrant and non-immigrant; young and old; gay and straight, religious and non-religious; etc.

Canada works because we are this diverse mix. Canada works because we all don't think the same way or believe the same things. We are what Joe Clark long ago called a “community of communities”. This feeds our innovativeness, our adaptiveness, our sense of security and our rich sense of belonging. It also supports our sense of equity and fair play. Canada works because Canadians have largely chosen to be accommodating to each other's differences. It has not worked by making us all the same. In full disclosure, however, I do not mean to equate this with the perverted notion of multiculturalism in common currency that decries the possibility of a Canadian culture and values in favour of the values of any non-Canadian culture.

That aside, I find it highly offensive when I see our governments and political parties trying to pit one group against another in their hopes of riding on the coattails of the largest minority or loudest interest group. Pearson's Parliamentary success was based on his ability to achieve a large measure of consensus if not agreement.

In my humble opinion, elected governments are meant to represent all of us. They should not be permitted to pick and choose who they represent. Their legitimacy stems not from the meager 20% of the population that may have made an effort to vote for them, but from their ability to represent the interests of the whole population. This has its basis in the very formation of Canada which was not the result of solitary individuals or single groups but the consequence of what was done together. Canada was formed by large groups reaching out across the barriers which divided them – French-English, Protestant-Catholic, and East-West. Forgoing this characteristic, undermines the very authority of government and the willingness of citizens to follow the rules.

Unlike the democratic [sham](#) into which it has deteriorated, Parliament could be a wonderful space to encourage multi-party dialogue and learning to better represent the many facets of our Canadian-ness. Yet Parliament has been continuously diminished for the last half century -- its very role and relevance now become the subject of existential debate.

In the place of multilogue, the hucksters and spin-masters have asserted that only one view is possible, their view, and that Canadian-ness is somehow a one-dimensional phenomenon. In a very Orwellian way, every Canadian must look, think, speak and act like them. All others

(amounting to 70-80% of the population) by implication are classified and treated as enemies, subject to whatever legal abuse as can be devised. Over time these anti-democrats have been stripping us of the skills and capacity for sustaining the greater Canadian commonwealth and pitting us against each other in endless rounds of fruitless competition.

Our legacy Westminster system has as its most basic tenet that someone is 'in charge'. But if ever there was a place on earth that demanded a system of distributed, poly-centric governance it is Canada. What Canada needs is not another political party playing the same old games of rational self interest, what we need are parties (the current ones are quite sufficient) willing to play a different, more collaborative game.

To achieve this would require a willingness to embrace the diversity represented in Parliament and to rethink fundamentally the appropriateness of our top-down, adversarial Westminster system (if there truly was ever a time appropriate for it). In its place is needed a more partnership form of governance, one that seeks to harness our differences not eliminate them. We need facilitators of cooperation not commanders or leaders. We need those who can generate a sense of shared belonging and ownership both in and out of the House. We need those who can help us articulate a common possibility towards which we can all collectively live into. We need those willing to listen, to learn and to teach. We need those who will not presume to be 'in charge', or assume that success at governing is merely a product of political gamesmanship. We don't need those who make fraudulent promises or try to bribe us with our own money but people who can take Canadians on a journey that never ends.

Don't expect progress on this front from any of the current crop of so called 'leaders'. My hope is that Canadian collective consciousness will mature sufficiently so that one day we will simply wake up and sweep away the self-serving, old guard, even as it is being swept away in the Middle East, reclaiming the collective ownership to our own governance in the process.

In the current election, there are [serious issues to discuss](#) with little hope of an adult conversation -- health care, two wars, national productivity, decaying infrastructure, climate change, energy sustainability, and a new risk of an economic hollowing out. We need all of our human and physical resources to tackle these challenges together. But if insanity is defined as doing the same things and expecting different outcomes, then what we may really need is something to shake us out of our collective dementia.