

Canada: Prorogation of the Reopening of Parliament, Undermining Democracy

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The reaction in Canada is strangely muted after the Governor General consented this Friday to prorogue or effectively delay the reopening of parliament until mid October. The fall session was due to commence in mid September. Now it's been shortened by a month.

This is the fifth time (1) the prime minister has done this type of thing. It's become a kind of pastime for the current PM. Meanwhile, there seems to be a deafening silence echoing through the empty cavernous chambers or corridors of legislative power. Not a peep from the speaker of the house, either. No reaction, no response to the move; not even the slightest stirrings of dissent, or any expression of dismay within the conservative caucus or party to this questionable move. Now that's what I call a rousing endorsement for the PM's decision to prorogue parliament once again!

Sure there are some rumblings and hushed grumblings (pro forma) of discontent on the opposition side; but apparently there's not much of an outcry or uproar or dare mention, even outrage, from the opposition parties. Perhaps they're still in summertime break mode. And, or also, maybe they could use more time to get back to the grinding, back-breaking routine of pounding on desktops, hollering at the top of their voices, and throwing verbal projectiles filled with invective and bile across the aisle of the lower chamber. They have been locked out for a month, and maybe to not relish the thought of going back to work yet. So for now, it seems Canadians will be deprived of rowdy political sparring and other untoward and unedifying spectacles, at least until around the time another hockey (the prime minister's favourite sport) season commences. Then the parliamentary slugfest will begin again. But thankfully for the PM it won't last long, that is, only two months or until the Christmas -New Year's break.

Fair play? No, the game is totally rigged

There are however some serious consequences to this unsavoury manoeuvre. Prorogation effectively wipes the legislative agenda clean, thus allowing the prime minister to reset the next session to his liking or whim. Thereby moulding and fashioning the debating and lawmaking process. He effectively takes control of the whole show, and for a man like him, total domination of parliamentary procedure is what it's all about. Isn't it so? The conservative PM sets the rules of the legislative game, but also determines how long the match will last, and when it is due to begin. In other words his team always wins the political points needed to win the next general elections.

As for the Governor General, a very distinguished looking figurehead indeed, yet part of time procedural rules just the same. By giving his consent to close down the House of Commons, he provides the PM a carte blanche to do it again the next time around. Permit

me to insert a few thoughts at this stage, on the process of governing in a functional democracy. Parliament shouldn't be reduced to being just a tool, used to further the political career of one man, nor increase his executive (by means of usurpation) powers, at the expense of the legislature. It should be a legislative body where democratic representation can be heard and where the government is held accountable for its decisions. And finally parliament is where issues vital to the national and the public's interest can be openly debated and then voted on. It is not personal plaything to be used for partisan purposes.

As a result of the delayed sitting of parliament, the conservative government which has been mired until now in scandal, is effectively off the hook for at least a month. Meanwhile, the government's spin doctors can plot and concoct strategy or devise new tactics to discredit and divide the already semi-emasculated opposition parties (The NDP, Liberals and Bloc Quebecois) in the house. By this I mean or put forth the following assertion: the official opposition exists (if at all) in name only. The current leader of the New Democratic Party Thomas Mulcair makes vapid at times incoherent pronouncements. He says the prime minister is "afraid"(2) to answer questions related to recent scandals related to slush funds, dodgy payments and inappropriate or not profligate spending in the Senate. This sounds rather lame to me. The PM simply knows he is feared by an opposition devoid of credible leaders, and can get away with these thuggish stunts which are meant to shut the House of Commons whenever it suits his fancy.

History of Harper's roughshod approach to parliament

The tactic to disrupt or delay the parliamentary agenda has become somewhat of a routine. In a shifty and sly manner the PM seems to be accustomed to shutting down parliament whenever the unpleasant stench of scandal implicating his closet aides (or Senate appointees) fills the almost rancid halls of parliament. The practise is perfectly legal but perhaps from a constitutional expert's point of view it might raise some uncomfortable questions such as: Does prorogation strengthen or undermine the parliamentary process? Has use of this legislative slight of hand, made Canada look less democratic in the world? Hasn't delaying the reopening of parliament deprived the electorate of their voice (through the channel of their MPs) at a time of great economic uncertainty, and rising international tensions? Does this practice not smack of authoritarian rule? In any case, it simply shows the current conservative regime has nothing but utter contempt for the Westminster tradition.

Perhaps history will judge this prime minister as a "Caudillo" or strongman; a term which has at times been associated machismo style of rule in minds and imagination of Latin Americans. But for many Canadians, this might be a new way of running affairs of state. From a much harsher perspective perhaps Harper's disdain for the parliamentary process is absolutist in a way, and takes back his country to the by-gone age when the all potent monarch's will carried the day. This might explain his unusual almost fawning veneration for the Queen of England. Yet her majesty might even disapprove of the cavalier, if not disrespectfully way her loyal subject, across the Atlantic handles or bullies the House of Commons. However one sees it parliamentary democracy in Canada is in a bad way.

Notes

(1) Prorogation X4, Socialist Actions , Canada , Sept. <http://socialistaction.ca/2013/09/02/prorogation-x4/>

(2)

<http://ca.news.yahoo.com/prorogation-shows-harper-afraid-questions-mulcair-says-194058050.html>

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