

Canada's Rogue Conservatives Prorogue Parliament

This is the second time the ruling party wants to shut down democracy

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This week during the year's slowest news period, startling reports from Ottawa have revealed that the Canadian conservative Prime Minister, Stephen Harper has prorogued or postponed the opening of parliament for at least a month. With the governor general's blessings (who according to parliamentary procedure has the authority to close down the legislature) he plans to proceed with this scurrilous plot and thereby undermine parliamentary democracy. If all goes according to Harper's plan, then the House of Commons which is due to resume its New Year's session on January 23rd will not sit until March 3rd or after the winter Olympic games to be held in February in Vancouver, B.C.

Will Harper's political gamble pay off?

This Machiavellian move is designed to stave off opposition parties' call for a full public inquiry, which would centre on the allegations of torture implicating the Canadian military, which surfaced during the last session of the House. On the home front, the prorogation of the legislature would also quell growing discontent in the country with the almost despotic tendencies of the current government. This is not the first time parliament has been shut down either. Back in December, 2008, Canada's Governor General Michaëlle Jean granted the prime minister's holiday wish and closed down the house just as the opposition sought to bring down the minority government with a non-confidence vote. The tactic effectively staved off an early general election and also saved the conservatives from imminent defeat allowing them to retain their stranglehold on power indefinitely. Reaction to the possibility of parliament becoming obsolete again was swift. Liberal House Leader Ralph Goodale called this machination a, "shocking insult to democracy."

The ruling party's silent coup

The attempt to close down the Canadian parliament is a political style putsch worthy of the best tradition of a "caudillos" or strongmen. It resembles a "manu duro" (strong hand) manoeuvre associated with third world states where democracy is still a "work in progress". It is likely at this point, that the PM will use whatever means necessary to silence growing dissent among the opposition parties and the citizenry reeling from the noxious side effects of this year's economic slowdown. Getting the governor general's consent, whether by coaxing or coercion, shouldn't be a problem for the P.M., as the governor general has shown little resistance to the governing party's previous attempts to emasculate the legislature in the past. This time Madame Jean will likely, as she did in 2008, once again give the government "carte blanche" to ride rough shod over the legislative process which is based on the idea, that parliament is supreme or sovereign and hence not beholden to any political party or a particular leader.

Historical precedents are relevant to the current crisis

Canada is at war and its enfeebled democratic institutions are facing a crisis of confidence or worse. A full blown constitutional conundrum may result over this move as the government decrees prorogation. There is ample historical irony in this situation. In critical periods of a nation's history parliament is supposed to be a valued political forum and arena for debate and discussion on how to resolve pressing issues. Way back, in 1778, during the American Revolution and the British Empire's war with its wayward colonies and as Britain was also threatened with invasion from France by the French fleet, King George III sought to prorogue parliament. His attempt, however, was deemed foolhardy by some brave souls opposed to this action, especially in a time of grave crisis. For instance, Sir James Lowther later known as "Earl of Lonsdale" and a member of parliament for over twenty years, presented a motion to defer the closure of the house of parliament.

In his appeal to the King, he argued it would be counterproductive to do so because " ... his Majesty would be deprived of that natural and constitutional advise and assistance which may be so necessary at this critical conjuncture and the united wisdom of the kingdom (i.e. parliament) is absolutely essential to secure us from impending danger." His appeal was not heeded and parliament was adjourned according to the king's wishes. Canada's less than enlightened ruler seems to be using his "divine right" to the same thing today.

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