

## Harper runs a wrecking crew, not a government

By [Frances Russell](#)

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The fear, loathing and demagoguery unleashed on Parliament Hill last week could create a dangerous constitutional precedent and cripple a necessary evolution in Canadian parliamentary democracy.

The nationwide hysteria whipped up by that fear, loathing and demagoguery may be dampened by the prorogation of Parliament until the end of January.

But at what price? An Ipsos Reid poll found that it left 75 per cent of Canadians “truly scared” for the future of their country. And a political scientist warns it gives future prime ministers the right to escape defeat on non-confidence motions simply by shutting down Parliament and locking its doors.

“Parliamentary democracy as it has been practised in Canada has been compromised,” University of Toronto political scientist Nelson Wiseman says. “The precedent established means that under no conditions will the Governor General ever deny a prorogation to sitting prime ministers, no matter what the circumstances.”

The Governor General grants prorogations by precedent. But every situation is fact-specific, he says.

This time there was a fact that had never existed before but it did not bear on her decision.

“We’ve never been in a situation where you’ve had a request for a prorogation and the Governor General was informed there was an alternative government that did have support of a majority of the members. In that context, I thought that it was reasonable for her to dismiss her first minister.”

Wiseman has further fears. “You’ve basically debased the legislative branch and its checks on the executive branch. The whole idea of responsible government is that the executive is responsible to Parliament. (The prorogation) has given the executive more arbitrary control over Parliament. The government already controls the business of Parliament. Now the government controls the very existence of a session of Parliament.”

Canada is divided linguistically and regionally, with multiple political parties and a parliamentary, not a presidential system. Coalition governments are becoming the only option to avoid political instability and multiple elections. Recent history proves the point. Since 2004, Canada has had three minority governments and three elections and may now be facing a fourth election and government in the new year.

But the hysteria whipped up by the fear, loathing and demagoguery of the past week has

made it all but impossible for parties to attempt working arrangements, let alone coalitions, in the foreseeable future.

While coalition governments have been rare in Canada, experience around the world — including in other Commonwealth countries — proves they are hardly dangerous. The British tradition of two parties hasn't existed here since the early years of the last century.

For almost 100 years, Canada has had at least three parties. Now it has five. Not only are parliamentary majorities increasingly unlikely, but a minority party trying to operate as if it has a majority is indefensible.

What's to fear from a coalition, from involving more parties and perspectives in government? The greater the participation, the greater the expansion of democracy. More Canadians might even be encouraged to vote.

Engaging the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois in supporting a federal coalition could bolster Canadian unity by re-engaging Quebec sovereigntists in Canada. "Separatist" is as inflammatory a label in Quebec as it is in English Canada, because many Québécois migrate back and forth across secessionist, nationalist and federalist lines.

Canadians do not elect a government, let alone a prime minister. They elect 308 MPs, who then choose the government and the prime minister. The government and the prime minister govern only so long as they retain the confidence of a majority of those 308 MPs. A party with a plurality of seats must negotiate and compromise with the opposition parties, not poke them in the eye with a sharp stick.

The Oct. 14 election gave the Tories 143 seats, 22 fewer than the 165 seats held by the combined opposition.

The Conservatives' deliberate demonization of the coalition as "socialists" and "separatists" as "treasonous" is the equivalent of yelling fire in a crowded theatre. It is shameful. It is also dishonest.

The public record shows that Harper as opposition leader in 2004 did exactly what the Liberals and NDP did last week with exactly the same objective.

He undertook serious negotiations with the parties he now chooses to deride as "traitors" so that he could take office should the Liberal minority government fall.

Dust off his 2000 Alberta "firewall" letter. Harper runs a wrecking crew, not a government. Parliament's well is poisoned and separatist fires in Quebec and Alberta are stoked. Harper is prepared to use anything — lies, vicious attack ads and even mob rule (Transport Minister John Baird boasting about "going over the heads of the Governor General and Parliament to the people" — to get his way).

Peace, order and good government are out. Rage, ideology and raw power are in.

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