

# Conclusion

These are not normal times. Canada's democracy is in crisis. We have a prime minister and a government that have demonstrated they are unfit to govern. But crises also present opportunities – opportunities to ensure the same crisis is not repeated.

The latest shutting down of Parliament by Stephen Harper was a wakeup call for Canadians who expressed their outrage on the streets, in letters-to-the-editor, on talk shows, and in the polls – driving the Harper Conservatives down 10 percentage points in popularity. Our democratic system – while not always abused the way Harper abuses it – has been exposed as extremely vulnerable to any prime minister who has power, and not just majority government power. Tremendous damage can be done to the fabric of the country by a prime minister with a minority in the House of Commons, and support from a minority of Canadians, if he or she is determined to bend and break the rules meant to protect democracy.

There will always be disagreements about the direction of the country – unanimity in terms of actual social, economic, cultural and foreign policies is impossible. But the system we use for ensuring an honest competition between those different views of the country must be sacrosanct. There must be a level playing field; a government of laws, not men – or we simply no longer have democracy.

That is why, in this unique situation in Canadian history, all Canadians who are dedicated to democracy – no matter what their political beliefs – must come together at the earliest opportunity to remove Harper from power. His many violations of democracy and the dangerous precedents they set are a threat to democracy itself.

There are many Canadians who like the policies of the Harper government and are willing to turn a blind eye to the violations of democracy that are being used to achieve them. But what goes around comes around: by allowing these precedents to be set, the next government – with or without a mandate – could use those precedents set by this prime minister to implement policies that the majority does not support or want.

We must get back to a democratic equilibrium whereby all the political parties and their leaders do politics by the rule of law.

One of the consequences of having no rules is political chaos: with society and its government policies being wrenched first this way, then that – with no stability, no certainty, and no time for reflection or consensus building. Politics that, in normal times, have been characterized more by relative consensus than by constant partisan warfare is not intended to dominate people's lives. It is meant to provide a context and atmosphere in which people can live their lives and communities can thrive – with security, confidence and a sense of continuity. The current political atmosphere, created largely by Harper (though not exclusively – his bad behaviour often brings out the worst in other politicians) provides none of these things. Politics at its best encourages people to get involved – they see the exercise of democracy as being in their interest, something they believe will respond to their needs, and a process in which they can trust. When they quit feeling that way, democracy cannot work.

It could be argued that democracy today is clearly not working because so many people are opting out. In the last election, fewer people voted than in any other federal election in Canadian history – just 59.1 per cent of the population cast a ballot. That means that four in 10 citizens no longer believed that democracy had anything to offer them or meant anything to them. That is amongst the lowest in the developed Western democracies and is reaching crisis proportions.

Stephen Harper's reign as prime minister must come to an end as soon as possible. But beyond that, his record of running roughshod over democracy tells us that we have to put in place reforms that make such abuse of power, if not impossible, then much less likely. No single reform can address all of the many different kinds of abuse we have witnessed over the past four years. We need restrictions on the power to prorogue; we need to protect watchdog organizations from being undermined by the prime minister of the day; we need to ensure that Access-to-Information really is about access and is not subject to partisan intervention from ministers or the Prime Minister's Office.

But perhaps the most important democratic reform we can call for is electoral reform, which would eliminate the feeling of many voters that their votes are “wasted.” Our current first-past-the-post system means that a party with as little as 40 per cent of the votes can achieve a majority government, and a party like the Greens can achieve nearly 7 per cent of voters’ support and not get a single seat (meaning that nearly a million people have no voice in Parliament). In fact, Canada is among just a tiny handful of Western democracies that still uses this arcane, elitist system of electing governments. Most countries now have some form of proportional representation – that is, a system that guarantees a political party the same percentage of seats in parliament as it receives in percentage of the popular vote.

If we had a system of proportional representation, the parties that could put together a coalition based on a mutually acceptable package of policies would have the constitutional authority to form the government – not the party that simply received the most seats in a minority parliament. If the last election had been run on such a system, the Conservatives would have had just 116 seats, not the 143 that has allowed them to govern the country as if it had a majority. The Liberals would have had 81, not 77; the NDP would have had 56 seats instead of 37 and the Greens 21 instead of none. The Bloc would have had 31, not 49. Under these circumstances, the Conservatives could not possibly have governed as no other party shares its ideology or policies. One possible scenario would have been a Liberal-NDP-Green coalition (total seats: 158) representing more than 50 per cent of Canadian voters.

But however it was worked out, the coalition government would have represented a much larger proportion of Canadians – and their values. Executive dictatorship – the complete dominance of Parliament by the Prime Minister’s Office – would be a thing of the past because the prime minister would have to negotiate every major policy decision with at least one and possibly three other parties. There would be no ideologically rigid government because no single party, regardless of ideology, could impose its agenda on Parliament (except in the extremely rare situation in which a single party received more than 50 per cent of the vote). Combined with other reforms that would make parliament – rather than the prime minister – supreme, proportional representation would restore the true meaning of democracy to Parliament.

As Canadians will remember, we almost had such a government in December 2008 when all three opposition parties declared their lack of confidence in the Harper Conservative government. The Liberals and NDP announced their intention to form a coalition government for 18 months based on a limited set of policies they agreed upon. The Bloc Québécois agreed to provide critical support. Just 43 per cent of Canadians supported the idea of a coalition or a more informal

opposition accord. But this was not a true test of a coalition government. Many Canadians understandably opposed the coalition because its leader, Stéphane Dion, had just been soundly rejected in the election. They did not want him to become prime minister through the back door.

But, partly as a result of Harper’s twice shutting down Parliament, Canadians are now more open to a voting system that would regularly produce coalition governments of the kind proposed in December 2008 by the Liberals, NDP and Bloc. According to an Environics poll commissioned by the Council of Canadians (completed between February 22 and February 24, 2010) 62 per cent of Canadians support a change in the voting system to one using proportional representation (PR). Thirty-six per cent of those surveyed said they were more supportive of PR as a result of Harper’s shutting down of Parliament. This latter figure suggests that the anger over Harper’s actions has resulted in a determination by voters to deal with the situation permanently: by changing the system itself. In addition, the strong support for PR is fairly consistent across the country – from a low of 59 per cent in Alberta to a high of 65 per cent in Québec. Young voters – prominent at the anti-prorogation demonstrations in January – were the strongest supporters, with 71 per cent favouring a change to proportional representation.

The poll numbers clearly put PR higher on the political agenda. But electoral reform is some ways off. Only the NDP and the Green Party have it in their election platforms. Yet we do not have to wait for an official change in the electoral system to achieve something similar. It would appear that Canadians fundamentally do not trust the current system, even if they are still undecided about a new one. Canadians show no signs of giving any party the level of support required for a majority government. That means we will face the same dilemma after the next election as we face at the moment: another government by a party (Conservative or Liberal) with a minority of seats and support from a minority of Canadians. Unless we demand of the opposition parties that they go into the next election with a pledge to form a coalition government that represents the majority of Canadians and their values. That could serve as the litmus test of the proportional representation system and its catalyst. If it worked to the satisfaction of Canadians, if it reduced the partisan bickering, if it put serious restrictions on the executive power of the Prime Minister’s Office, if it produced policies and programs that reflected our values, it would become the consensus position of Canadians – and the default position of any political party that wanted their support.