

PEACE IN OUR TIME: HOW THE VANCOUVER GAMES BRING POLITICAL STABILITY TO FEDERAL POLITICS

Graham Fox

One of the collateral benefits of the Vancouver Games is that they could provide a season of political peace and stability in Ottawa. With all eyes on Vancouver in February, Canadians will be in no mood for the political shenanigans of a minority House. And the good feeling from Vancouver could carry over into March, when the budget is expected to be presented. That will be the opposition's next opportunity to bring down the government, but there is no sense that the voters, in the afterglow of Vancouver, will be in the mood for an election. Contributing Writer Graham Fox elaborates.

Parmi leurs avantages accessoires, les Jeux olympiques pourraient offrir à Ottawa une période de calme et de stabilité politiques fort bienvenue. En février, tous les regards seront tournés vers Vancouver, et les Canadiens auront peu d'appétit pour les manœuvres d'une Chambre minoritaire. Cette euphorie olympique pourrait bien se prolonger jusqu'en mars, mois au cours duquel le budget devrait être déposé. Ce sera pour l'opposition une nouvelle occasion de défaire le gouvernement, mais les électeurs ne seront guère d'humeur à se rendre aux urnes si peu de temps après les Jeux, croit notre collaborateur Graham Fox.



“After four years of drift, four years of denial, four years of division and four years of discord, Mr. Harper, your time is up.” With those fighting words spoken at his party's summer caucus retreat in Sudbury on September 1, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff put the country on what seemed at the time to be an unavoidable collision course with a fourth general election in five years. Emboldened by summer polls that had the Liberals and Conservatives trading the lead in public opinion, and still smarting from having played electoral chicken with the Prime Minister in June and lost, the Liberals were convinced that the time had come to withdraw their confidence in the government and send Canadians to the polls.

Three short months later, the political landscape is almost unrecognizable from the one that led to Ignatieff's open challenge to the Prime Minister. The Liberals find themselves a full 10 points back in most opinion polls and dipping below the low-water mark set by Stéphane Dion in the last general election. Moreover, the November 9 by-election results show just how long a road the opposition must travel before it regains the confidence of Canadians.

While no one seriously expected the Liberals to win any of the four contests that night, the fact that they could not manage better than a third-place showing in a single constituency would have given pause to even the most enthusiastic of

Liberal partisans. Using the by-election results as supporting arguments, political pundits and image makers insisted that Ignatieff must first deal with his image problem in the eyes of voters before attempting to take down the government. True, the disconnect between citizens and their would-be prime minister is clear, but there is growing evidence that the bigger challenge is rooted in the Liberal Party's ability to find a compelling story to tell Canadians, not just in how it is told. Image, after all, must follow the narrative — and until Ignatieff finds his own narrative for where he wants to lead us, putting on a jean shirt or a casual sweater won't change very much to advance his cause. As Ignatieff himself remarked the morning after the by-elections, there is a great deal of work to be done.

Those of us who have grown tired of the constant threat of elections can take comfort — at least temporarily — in this latest period of political détente. Speculation that the Conservatives are now flirting with majority territory notwithstanding, it seems the government is intent on governing for the foreseeable future, and the official opposition has taken the bullet out of the chamber, at least for now.

The clearest sign to date of the Liberals abandoning their focus on the short play and adopting a longer-term strategy came in mid-November with the announced changes in the

structure of the Office of the Leader of the Opposition (OLO) and the composition of senior staff. The appointment of Peter Donolo as chief of staff two weeks prior had certainly caused a stir in Ottawa, and the changes introduced on his first day at the office confirmed Donolo's acknowledgement that the road to 24 Sussex was going to be longer than had perhaps been hoped when Ignatieff assumed the Liberal

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crown in May. Donolo successfully recruited a roster of staffers that stacks up well compared to any OLO in recent memory, and the organizational chart suggests a streamlined, back-to-basics approach to opposition politics that reveals the shift in strategy.

Of course, a week is a long time in politics, and as we have seen several times in the last year, fortunes can turn on a dime. A sudden reversal in the parties' standing in public opinions due to an unforeseen event could prove irresistible to the opposition, and Canadians could yet be rushed to the polls before long.

Enter the Vancouver Games: 2010's most significant meeting place for the world, a point of national pride for all Canadians and perhaps our best hope to avoid an election this side of 2011. Nestled as they are between the opening of the winter session of Parliament and the G8 Summit in the Muskokas followed by the G20 in Toronto, the Vancouver Games may well prove to be the single biggest obstacle to anyone looking to trigger an election in 2010, on a number of levels.

First, as Canada plays host to the world, it is doubtful that Canadians will want to do so with campaign signs lining the streets between the airport and the Olympic sites, and campaign slogans dominating the headlines. Surely, we will want to celebrate before the world what unites us as a country, rather than our competing plans for climate change and our preferred dates for troop withdrawal

from Afghanistan. There is no hard rule, of course, about the House of Commons maintaining its confidence in the government simply because the world is watching, but there would be a hefty reputational price for Canada to pay if we failed to keep it together for those 20 critical days in February. The unseemly debates that would inevitably ensue about the political advantage enjoyed by

the government during the Games should be enough to convince us all that a February election is just a bad idea.

Secondly, there is no telling what impact our country's performance during the Games will have on public opinion, even if the impact is only fleeting. The feel-good factor driven by a stellar opening ceremony, an unprecedented medal haul by our athletes or hockey gold could boost support for the government; while a disappointing showing could make voters cranky and looking for someone to blame, to say nothing of the possible public backlash against any political leader seen to be trying to take partisan advantage from the Olympics. Why risk an election during such a volatile time?

Finally, bookended as it is by Canada hosting the world in Vancouver in February and hosting the world again in the Muskokas as well as Toronto in June, the spring session of Parliament will provide the opposition with only the narrowest of windows to trigger an election. Assuming that, just as one would want to avoid an election during the Games, we should also avoid having one during a major global economic summit, any government that wants to be ready to play a leadership role at the G8 should be sworn in no later than some six weeks before the summit. With a minimum 36-day writ period, that leaves a window not much wider than the month of March for the House to withdraw its confidence in the government. Should it not happen by April 1, it becomes increasingly easy to see a clear path for the government to

remain in office through the spring session, into the summer and up to the opening of the fall sitting of the House in September 2010.

If the government survives the confidence votes around the 2010 budget, the challenge for the opposition by the fall of 2010 will be to find a compelling reason to go to the polls. As has been shown in recent years, the summer political season is notorious for favouring the incumbent. Coming out of the Olympics, the G8 Summit and a summer of glad-handing his way across the country, the Prime Minister is likely to be in a relatively strong position when he faces the Commons in the fall. Without a compelling issue on which to vote no confidence, all opposition eyes may well turn to 2011 and the federal budget.

By then, according to most economic forecasts, the Canadian economy will be more firmly on the path to recovery and the debate will shift away from stimulus toward each party's plan to fight the deficit and bring the federal government back into the black. To be sure, the government will have begun that transition in its 2010 budget, but as 2010 will still be a year of transition for our economy, the real test will not come until the following year. The government will have made its plans public through two budgets, and the new OLO team will have had 18 months to turn Liberal fortunes around and lay the groundwork for an election campaign. That will be the moment at which the Liberals can strike a sharp contrast with the government and challenge the government. Until then, the points of differentiation on matters of public policy are more likely to be nuance or emphasis rather than stark choices.

As part of its mandate, the International Olympic Committee strives to promote peace through sport. Who knew that, in 2010, the Olympic truce might apply just as well to our politics as to conflicts around the globe?

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