

REMEMBERING THE FUN OF MINORITY GOVERNMENT?

Desmond Morton

Historian Desmond Morton looks back on Canada's previous minority governments, and the prospects for the new minority in the 38th Parliament. Some minority prime ministers, John Diefenbaker in 1962-63 and Joe Clark in 1979-80, "managed minority status so badly that they soon lost their jobs." One minority PM, Pierre Trudeau, in 1974 arranged his own defeat over a budget that plunged the nation into decades of deficits, but returned with a renewed majority. Only the Pearson minorities of 1963-65 and 1965-68 are remembered with fondness for their legislative legacy. What will the Martin minority be like? That depends a lot on the Bloc, and on the NDP.

Desmond Morton se penche sur les gouvernements minoritaires du passé et sur les perspectives de celui que les Canadiens ont élu en juin dernier. Certains premiers ministres qui ont dû gouverner avec une minorité parlementaire — John Diefenbaker en 1962-63 et Joe Clark en 1979-80 — s'en sont si mal tirés qu'ils n'ont pas tardé à perdre leur poste. Un autre — Pierre Trudeau en 1974 — a fait en sorte que son gouvernement soit défait sur une question budgétaire qui plongera le pays dans plusieurs décennies de déficits, mais qui lui permettra de revenir au pouvoir avec une majorité. Seuls les gouvernements minoritaires Pearson de 1963-65 et de 1965-68 ont laissé une impression favorable en raison de leur legs législatif. Quelle orientation prendra le gouvernement Martin ? La réponse dépendra pour une large part du Bloc québécois et du NDP.

By June 28th, about the only thing that even well-briefed Canadian voters knew about their current general election was that Canada was likely to emerge from the ordeal with a minority Liberal government. My own small sample of conservative McGill students certainly reflected that outcome. Far from applauding Stephen Harper's post-debate boast that he might well win a majority, many of these students seemed quite alarmed. Tax cuts, privatization of health care, and chopping the civil service and joining George Bush's nuclear missile shield might be okay, but the Bible-belt verities of Harper's Alliance followers struck my circle of e-mail political junkies as totally uncool.

Fear of a Harper government mobilized even more of Jack Layton's backers than my young neo-cons. Like many Liberals, NDPers saw Harper's post-merger Conservatives as a Canadian version of the Republican Party eager to cozy up to George W. Bush. Early in the campaign, Liberal strategists had warned me that they would exploit fears of waking up to a Harper government to regain thousands of defectors to the NDP. True, it required more media time and a little help from Harper himself to demolish Layton's dream of 40 seats but it worked. Lots of NDP voters were willing to forgive Paul Martin Junior for deficit-killing policies that let homeless Canadians freeze and which moved us back to credit-card health care. Early in his campaign, Martin had denounced New Democrats as the

party of mindless extravagance; in the last days, Martin insisted that his dear old daddy had raised him as an instinctive social democrat. "A week is a long time in politics," said British Labour prime minister Harold Wilson. For many Canadians, a few weeks of campaigning was long enough to forget what they knew at the beginning.

As a historian, preserving memories is a professional chore. I have been alive and voting since John Diefenbaker was elected in 1957. I experienced all but the first of Canada's six minority Parliaments. Frankly, I don't remember most of them with any great fondness, though I remember that they gave much employment to pundits and journalists, and large dollops of advertising revenue to media magnates. Rather than enjoy their power and influence, most Canadian electors have echoed my distaste. Instead of revelling in holding politicians to account, Canadian voters generally resent elections, with their sign pollution, arguments, extra knocks at the door, and disruption of the TV schedule. Any politician who could be blamed with forcing an election, whatever the issue, has usually been punished at the polls.

Some prime ministers, notably John Diefenbaker in 1962-63, and Joe Clark in 1979-80, managed minority status so badly that they soon lost their jobs. Both refused to take Quebec's now-vanished delegation of Créditistes into account. More shocking, in retrospect, is how two prominent Liberals blatant-

ly exploited voters' prejudices and were rewarded with fat new majorities. The King-Byng affair in 1926 is so complex and bizarre that I often can't find time to include it in a low-level survey course. Let me take it as read and confess, as a disciple of the late Eugene Forsey, that Mackenzie King behaved despicably — but so did the voters who gave him a majority. And King was not as irresponsible as Pierre-Elliott Trudeau in 1974, when he persuaded John Turner, his finance minister, to index social payments and de-index personal taxes, creating both wild public pleasure and the structural deficit that soon crippled Canada's federal government. When the NDP's David Lewis forced an election to protest Trudeau's utter irresponsibility, editorial writers blamed him for a useless election. On July 8, 1974, voters granted Trudeau a renewed majority and drove David Lewis out of politics. Not until 1995-96 could a prime minister find the intestinal fortitude to tackle Trudeau and Turner's major legacy.

Among Canadian minority prime ministers, only Mike Pearson so far seems to have had the skills to get worthwhile results from minority parliaments. Too its lasting credit, only *Policy Options*, in its June 2033 survey on the best PM's of the previous half-century, had the good sense to recognize that this luckless man with a lisp may have been our best prime minister. Leaders with modest egos and "diplomats' ears" are sadly scarce.

If Canadians had stuck to their voting intentions on, say, September 21st, we might well have had the kind of minority governments we allegedly remember with some fondness. The Liberals would still have formed a cabinet, but the NDP would have had enough seats to form a respectable partnership, granting Jack Layton the kind of bargaining power Tommy Douglas exercised in the mid-1960s. Instead, like R al Caouette in 1962 and 1963, Gilles Duceppe will be the biggest minority party leader when Parliament finally meets.

Duceppe has an added advantage. Quebec's so-called "fiscal imbalance" is

an issue both sovereignist and federalist Quebecers understand. Like every other government at any level, Quebec wants more money. Like the rest, Quebec knows that Paul Martin's fame as a deficit-fighter was won when Jean Ch rien let his former finance minister grab their transfer payments. For Duceppe's constituency, minority government is payback time. Other Canadians will be divided over the new programs Martin promised last spring. Quebecers already have most of those programs; they just want the cash.

Amidst a large and raucous chorus, from big city mayors to the Assembly of First Nations, Duceppe will head a single-minded caucus that puts Quebec's grievances first, last and always. If the Ch rien team got lots of credit in the rest of Canada for apparently putting Quebec sovereignty to sleep, Paul Martin will get the blame for waking it up again, at time when lots of other Canadians will also be shouting "me first!"

The Liberals have other Quebec problems, including disaffected Ch rienites, the fall-out from Mr. Justice Gomery's sponsorship inquiry, and a lack of volunteers for rebuilding their party in the sovereignist hinterland. Their chief worry is the continuing dismal performance of Charest's luckless government. Duceppe has problems too. The leadership tent for Quebec sovereignists is a nest of vipers. Last June, even non-Quebecers got an inkling when TV cameras showed Parti Qu b cois leader Bernard Landry cheerfully undermining Duceppe's fervent fudge that votes for the Bloc had nothing to do with separatism. Any federal funds Duceppe extorts for Quebec will immediately help Charest's Liberals. Extra cash, judiciously spread, could keep sovereignists at bay for another four years.

What about the NDP? Given Paul Martin's election-eve play for NDP votes, can Layton make himself part of the debate in the next couple of years? To do so, he has to select his cards as carefully as he plays them. Layton's fondness for proportional representation, or PR, may play well among his fellow profs at

Ryerson and even in the editorial offices at the *Globe and Mail*. It might have given Conservatives a seat in Quebec and the NDP a federal foothold in, of all places, Alberta. But who else really cares? Is fiddling with the voting system really the top priority for Canada's Left?

Next winter, as Layton knows better than most people, more homeless Canadians will die of exposure. Fifteen years ago, Ed Broadbent got a Conservative government to pledge an end to child poverty. Instead, we got the Liberals, and more ill-fed, ill-clothed children in Canada than ever. Surely these are priority issues for people who traditionally like the influence the NDP exists to exercise in our public affairs. They also fit priorities that Martin professed, at least when he feared that voters intended him for the rubbish heap. Tackling homelessness and child poverty would invade some provincial spheres and enrage the Bloc, but anyone who voted NDP and even most Liberals are shamed by these blights on our society.

As Layton also knows, homelessness and child poverty are neither simple problems nor wholly susceptible to cheque-book politics, but Ottawa has the funds to start building social housing and to fund serious child support. That's just what we did after 1945 when Paul Martin's dad was minister of health and welfare for 11 memorable post-war years.

As further unsolicited advice, Martin should consider alleviating his one-seat voting deficit in the House of Commons by proposing a suitable Conservative as Mr. Speaker. In case anyone hasn't noticed, the last House of Commons set the style for the exasperating raucous non-stop din that poisoned last June's televised leaders' debates. Why not invite a stern, old-fashioned Conservative to restore decorum to a House that has sounded like a daycare for hyperactive children, with the staff on coffee break. The mental and physical relief would do a lot to prolong this Parliament and make it productive.

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