

Crashing Parliament? Crash the Electoral System!

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Saturday, January 14, 2006

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The 39th general election of Canada on January 23, 2006 election must be a miscarriage, a mistrial, a failure. We need it to fail to produce a government. We need to go to the polls again in two months to go through the process again, again with no result. We need a flabbergasted electorate. Now is our chance. From this we can achieve meaningful electoral reform and heal the toxic state of democracy in Canada.

Last November I sat in a lecture hall at Simon Fraser University to hear Jack Layton speak. He was late. After a short, reasonable delay he came in and apologized for his tardiness by saying he had been on the phone with Stephen Harper that morning and just before he came in, Gilles Duceppe. Why? He was crashing the parliament. He was going to vote with the two opposition parties on a non-confidence motion to force an election earlier than the Liberals had wished it--after the second half of the Gomery report.

During Layton's speech, he reviewed the conditions under which the NDP supported a Liberal minority government last June. It was a disillusioning litany of broken promises, resting mainly on Martin's failure to protect public health care. Interestingly, the Conservatives claim in a smear commercial that the prime minister attends a private health clinic.

But then, what would really force the Liberals to substantially follow up on all their commitments to the NDP. It's not like they ultimately sought an extended mandate as a minority government. At some point, they were going to seek a majority mandate, so letting slip commitments to the NDP was an easy strategic move.

The most poignant point for me, however, in Layton's justification for crashing parliament on his timeline instead of Martin's was in reference to Martin's commitment to strike a parliamentary committee to examine electoral reform. It was to be struck by August 2005 and report to parliament in January 2006. It was never struck.

Martin's failure to form this committee is emblematic of our diseased democracy. Constitutionally, we are required to have a federal election at most every five years. There is no constitutional requirement for how we conduct elections. In the sick old days of old, drunk, white haired British-accented men running for the House of Commons under the Whigs and Tories, a first-past-the-post electoral system worked well. In every riding, barring a tie or rare independent candidate, the Whig or Tory won a majority of votes and was clearly elected.

In fact, in 1867, two candidates garnered virtually all votes in each riding except in 4 rare ridings where a third person posed real competition [[Kent](#), [Digby](#), [Halifax](#), [Richelieu](#)]. [Examine all other early elections](#) to see the distribution. Then look at the distribution of votes in ridings in elections from the last few decades, particularly the debacle of the 1988 free trade election/theft. A multitude of candidates means getting elected can require much less than 50% of the votes in a riding.

Today, when I voted in advance polls, there were 8 candidates to choose from: Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Green, Libertarian, Marxist-Leninist, Communist, and Connie Fogal--leader of the [Canadian Action Party](#). If Liberal Industry Minister David Emerson gets re-elected, it will almost certainly be with far less than 50% of the votes. In fact [in the June 2004 election](#), Emerson "won" with 17,000+ votes out of 42,000+ votes cast, while competing against 7 other candidates where just the Conservative and NDP candidates earned 22,000+ votes--together just over 50% of votes cast.

So since Confederation, with the advent of additional, meaningful regional or philosophically alternative parties [Green, CCF/NDP, Bloq Quebecois, Canadian Action Party, Marijuana Party, Natural Law Party, Reform Party before it took over the PCs, etc.], our electoral system is largely characterized by vote-splitting and strategic moves to ensure a victory, even if an MP wins less than 50% of the vote in a riding. As long as they win more than any one other candidate, they win. This must stop. Now.

So while we're off to the polls again in 9 days, I have a dream to share. It is a dream of creating a meaningful democracy in Canada. It is the dream that Lorne Nystrom, long-time Saskatchewan NDP MP has when he forever floated private members bills designed to examine our antiquated and anti-democratic electoral system. It is a dream he carried into helping found [Fair Vote Canada](#), a federal NGO working for electoral reform that is growing in power, influence and membership. The fact that an NGO instead of a political party is one of the key proponents of electoral reform say a great deal about the lack of poignancy and relevance of party politics today. But that's another issue.

Our issue today is to watch the poll results on January 23rd. With the Bloc taking most or virtually all of Quebec, a Liberal or Conservative majority is unlikely without some radical seat shifting and regional power blocks that are as yet not indicated in polling. In fact, with the non-separatist parts of the country so evenly split along moral, philosophical and economic lines--much like the United States--a majority seems impossible.

So vote for whoever you like, but when the returns come in, let's hope for a Conservative minority government--and not just because [Dave said so](#). Even if heaps of people outside Quebec vote Conservative, another large Bloc showing will keep Harper from the iron fist rule that prime ministers enjoy in Canada since Trudeau's draconian PMO reforms.

A Liberal minority will lead to the same kind of bad faith deal making with the NDP since neither the Bloc nor the Conservatives would likely vote with the Liberals in a confidence motion or even to pass a budget. Another Liberal-NDP minority would just be another countdown to another election. This would be enough to continue frustrating the electorate in the ways I wish. Read on.

A Conservative minority would lead to an even better level of annoyance to the public as we flush another \$200 million down the drain in another federal election. Barring some sort of nose-pinching NDP deal with Harper [electoral reform, child care, tax cuts, whatever] or some sort of power-devolving pact with the Bloc, Harper could not form a government because on first analysis, no other party in its right mind would vote with the Conservatives without a huge bribe. Other parties may be in better positions to not support a Harper minority and force yet another election, hoping for more showing as the previously cash-hog Liberal and Conservative parties flounder in debt.

Essentially, I'm a fan of no firm conclusion in this election. My theory is that as we have serial,

inconclusive \$200 million federal elections, the populace and the media will slowly discover the truth that our electoral system is a sham. Perhaps it was fine for the 19th century, but the 21st century is a different world--especially since white people will no longer be a majority of the Canadian population in 10 years. By the way, have you counted the number of non-white or female MPs lately?

No majority in June 2004 with a weak Liberal-NDP minority "government" combined with a still-born Conservative minority in January 2006 leading to another election in the spring of 2006, likely to lead to another minority may be enough to force us all to see the obvious truth: the need for electoral reform.

Canada has a future of meaningful democratic representation. It is a future with no, or at least fewer wasted votes. It is a future of more deal-making, consensus and coalitions. The myth that one party with a majority meaningfully represents any kind of "majority" or "large-ish" cohesive minority of Canadians has expired. We need to kill it on the electoral level.

We need some kind of representative governing structure that actually represents us. And with a more coalition-like result from a reformed electoral system, we get the added bonus of diluting the near-absolute power the prime minister's and privy council offices hold since future governments will need to seek greater consensus than that achieved in secret caucus meetings will be necessary.

So. Vote your conscience. Vote strategically. Vote because you like/trust/admire one candidate/leader or hate another. Vote for platforms that you like or against ones that offend you. Or don't vote--the more who don't, the lower the turnout and the less legitimate our system finally appears. It doesn't matter, as long as the Bloc cleans up Quebec, keeping a majority party win.

In the end, one blog piece or newspaper editorial or MP speech will not convince 20 million Canadians that we're fools to keep on with this electoral system. Wasting \$200 million a few times with inconclusive ruling parities might be enough to make us realize that the system is broken. And since each election costs each Canadian merely \$7, I think this is a price we can afford to pay a few times to help us all realize we need a better system that will be worth our time, respect and voter turnout.

So here's to Stephen Harper: the man who won't be king. And say a toast to the Bloc for helping us see the error of our electoral ways.