

## Contempt, democracy, and change

by kevin harding - Friday, March 25, 2011

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So far, 2011 has been an interesting year, one full of history, democracy, and change - and hope. We've seen uprisings throughout northern Africa and the Middle East, with people demanding democracy instead of oppressive governments and dictatorships.

Today, something historic happened in Canada as well - though nothing on the level of what's happening throughout the rest of the world. Indeed, today was quite likely a low point of Canadian 'democratic' history: the government of the day was found, by the House of Commons, to be in contempt of Parliament -- that is, willfully ignoring and acting against the privileges, rights, and duties of the Parliament of Canada.

This is huge. But it speaks to a huge problem afflicting that which is 'democracy' in Canada. So today, while it was an historic moment in Canada, a day in which, for the first time in history a government was found in contempt of Parliament, it wasn't an historic day in the same way that 2011 has been historic for large parts of the world.

Today was not a day of hope, democracy, and change - today was a day of contempt for democracy that speaks to a desperate need for change. Here's why.

**Democracy is not a nuisance, it is not 'unnecessary,' and it is not 'reckless.'**

Today's speeches and grandstanding have shown very well how the Conservative Party sees democracy in Canada. Quite clearly, they see it as "unnecessary" and "reckless." They've gone so far in this respect that

Stephen Harper has pointed to the earthquake and tsunami disaster in Japan as reasons why elections are reckless. Conservative party loudmouths John Baird and others have yelled this at us continuously - according to them, we don't need elections.

Aside from the apocryphal outcome of this statement - Emperor Harper - it's absurd and insulting. If we accept that wars have been fought for democracy, then why are elections unnecessary? If the concept of a Parliament is that the government must hold the confidence of the members of the House of Commons - the only representatives that we have in national politics - then why is an election unnecessary when a majority of those representatives have no confidence in the government?

Democracy is not unnecessary. It is not reckless. It is not a nuisance.

While I strongly feel that representative democracy in Canada - that sees us as voters choose the least offensive candidate in our ridings in the hopes of avoiding the most offensive of governments - is flawed and must be revised, the truth of the matter is that it is the system that we currently have to govern ourselves and our country. We elect, occasionally, representatives who then govern the country, on our behalf. The person elected who can command the support of a majority of those representatives - generally articulated through a political party and party support - becomes the prime minister.

If, through corruption, contempt of parliament, and ethical scandal upon ethical scandal, that prime minister loses the confidence and support of the House - as what happened today - then, by definition, an election is necessary. To suggest otherwise is to insult Canadians. Democracy is something that people have fought wars over. It is most decidedly not a nuisance.

### **Contempt of Parliament - and democracy**

But insulting us is something that Harper's Conservative Party is extremely good at doing.

In a Parliamentary system, it is constitutional law and constitutional fact that Parliament is supreme. This means that it passes laws and can edit them. And to do this, it must have the proper information and answers - and respect - that it needs in order to function. Today's vote of no confidence was built on the fact that the Harper regime has outright refused to provide information to the Parliament, when it has formally demanded it, on any number of things. Costs of superprisons and putting pretty much everyone in jail. Costs of jet fighters that are sole-sourced that we don't really need. They refused to disclose the documents on possible war crimes and Afghan detainees. Ministers apparently misled the Parliament - and Canadians.

All of this adds up to a government that quite obviously holds Parliament - and Canadian democracy - in contempt. [I wrote on this earlier](#), but here's the brief: Harper and his party find Canadian democracy a nuisance. They'd much rather prefer it if Canadians just didn't care about politics so they could go about their merry little neoliberal plans without protest. So they act in a way so as to disgust Canadians with politics, alienate us from our processes of governance, and build up dislike of the entire concept of the political.

The vote today is only one example of this, as is Harper's insulting characterization of democracy as reckless, unnecessary, and a nuisance.

## We need change - and not just a change of colour

So, we're having an election. That might bring some change. Plus, it's democracy in action. Isn't that enough?

No.

The next thirty-five or so days, up to the big day where we march into the gym of a local school, or a church, and mark an 'X' next to the name of the least offensive candidate in our ridings, is a length of time where we will be bombarded with ads from political parties. The red signs will tell us to vote red to avoid the blue. The blue signs will tell us that if we don't vote for them, separatists and socialists will eat our kittens. And the orange signs will tell us to vote for them so that you don't have to pay \$1.25 at the ATM. (Et, d'accord, si vous êtes au Québec, les placards violets vont dire "votez pour nous, et nous devenions maîtres chez nous.")

If the system is flawed, then this part of the system is flawed too. Political parties have developed as little organizations that exist solely to grab power and exercise it. Some of them - like the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, once upon a time - may have been grassroots, dedicated to real social change, but they aren't any longer. People no longer feel represented by political parties, they feel alienated from them, and it's these parties that are about to contest this election.

The way that parties operate gives rise to party operatives and apparatchiks who don't really care about democracy. To them - and to many of the government MPs who were just found in contempt of democracy - parties are vehicles to get power. Not to represent Canadians, work for common causes, but to seize and wield power.

A perfect example of this is my former MP, James Moore. Until the Parliament is dissolved, he is the Minister of Canadian Heritage. One might think that if serving Canadians, working for Canada's best interests, and doing things that Canadians care about was why he was in politics, then he might take that seriously.

Instead, he put the following up on Twitter just before the confidence vote, as a Liberal MP came to talk to him about funding for the arts and immigration cases:



In this Twitter post, Moore "laughs" at a Liberal MP who happened to ask about arts files - his Ministerial responsibility. Yes, the Liberal MP was about to vote no confidence, which is what happens when a government is in contempt of parliament and democracy, but it's **still** Moore's job. And is, in fact, until the next Minister is named.

This is how the Conservative party sees things. The point of democracy, to them, is not collective governance, or making sure the government works properly. It's to make sure that the Conservative party is in power, at the expense of everyone else. You can be sure that had a Conservative MP come to ask him

for help on arts files, Moore wouldn't have been laughing and then gloating about it.

I told Moore that I wasn't impressed about this, and that I didn't find the fact that he was laughing at another MP doing his job - **actually representing constituents** - was all that funny. He sent me a private message, saying:



Not only is James Moore incapable of seeing his own contempt for the concept of representative democracy, he takes the opportunity to speak down to me - a Canadian. Who has contempt in this situation?

Political parties, at least how they work now, are not ways to actually represent Canadians and ensure democratic functioning of government. Their entire goal is to seize power and wield it. To do so, they'll engage in anything - in the case of the Conservative party, offensive and disgusting attack ads, and election alleged election law violations - to win power. Add to that, 'attacking Canadians who might actually care.'

It's for reasons like this, like James Moore's contempt, and his government's contempt, that I think we need more than just cosmetic change, swapping the blue government for the red, or the slightly orange-tinted one. We need to change the system.

Democracy is about all of us, who live together, work together, and exist together, deciding how we will do all of that. It's about collective self-governance. It's about our common projects, our common rights, our common responsibilities.

It's not about one group taking power over all of us, and gloating as they do so.

So yes, an election is coming up. And in about thirty five or so days we'll mark an 'X' next to the name of the least offensive candidate in the hopes of avoiding the most offensive government. But it doesn't have to be that way.

So let's start a discussion on what we can do different. How we can empower Canadians - all of us - to take part in democracy and governance. How we can rescue that which so many people around the world are still, today, fighting for - democracy.