

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Analysis

## For Harper, 2009 was a very good year

Prime Minister will look back on a string of policy successes, even as decision to prorogue leaves a bad taste in opponents' mouths

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Whether he looks forward or backward, Stephen Harper must be enjoying the view.

The Prime Minister had a very good 2009, blending policy successes with bare-knuckle political fisticuffs that left one opposition politician after another reeling.

His decision to prorogue Parliament for pretty much the rest of the winter has pundits and constitutional experts howling. Well we should howl. Shutting down the House and Senate for the second time in one year makes a mockery of Parliamentary government.

But prorogation leaves the Conservatives with a clear field and this Prime Minister with a deserved reputation as the most capable manager of minority government since Lester Pearson nearly half a century ago.

In the legislatively vacant months to come, the Conservatives will prepare for the March 4 budget that must address the question of balancing the federal books after the stimulus program ends in 2011.

In the meantime, the public service will continue to manage the day-to-day of government; ministers will prepare and propose to the PM their legislative priorities for 2010, Mr. Harper will travel the land extolling the virtues of his government's ongoing stimulus plan, and the media will relentlessly speculate on the possibility of a cabinet shuffle (likely) or a vote of no-confidence in the government after the March 3 Speech from the Throne (most unlikely).

The opposition parties are threatening to continue holding ad-hoc hearings into the abusive treatment of Afghan detainees back in 2006, but that will be mere theatre. Without the legal immunity conferred on those who testify before a true Parliamentary committee, witnesses will be more than reluctant to come forward.

And whether Conservative cabinet ministers were negligent in protecting detainees from being abused by their Afghan jailors appears to be, for most Canadians, a quibble. Despite weeks of embarrassing revelations last autumn that left Defence Minister Peter MacKay thrashing in a morass of self-created contradictions, polls continue to show the Conservatives solidly in front of Michael Ignatieff's Liberals.

A survey released this week by Nanos Research has the Tories 10 points ahead of the official opposition and Mr. Harper's approval rating double that of Mr. Ignatieff's. The numbers suggest that the Conservatives would be foolish to seek an election, and the Liberals suicidal to force one.

The best prediction now is for a trip to the polls in the autumn, before the Conservatives are forced to bring down the 2011 austerity budget.

Frank Graves, the president of Ekos Research, attributes the government's relative popularity to three things.

First, he said, "the economy has sort of come back."

It seems very likely that the economic stimulus plan put in place last February has kept thousands of Canadians working. The economy created 79,000 jobs in November, pushing the unemployment rate down to 8.5 per cent from 8.6 per cent in October. That's bound to garner good vibrations for the Tories.

Second is the unwavering strength of Mr. Harper's committed base.

"And the third thing that seals the deal," Mr. Graves said, "... is that there is no compelling evidence that anybody else is going to be either different or better."

Mr. Ignatieff is no more popular than his predecessor, Stéphane Dion, who must be counted the most unsuccessful leader in the history of the Liberal Party.

With a relentless campaign of attack ads against Mr. Ignatieff – "Just Visiting" – the Tories appear to have been as effective in damaging his brand as they were previously in diminishing Mr. Dion.

Meanwhile, Mr. Harper's capable rendition of a Beatles song during a surprise appearance at an Ottawa gala helped thaw, if only marginally, his glacial image.

The Conservatives can also take credit for delivering on their promise to get tough on offenders, easily pushing bill after bill through the House – although many others died on the order paper with prorogation.

The Tories passed legislation to harmonize the GST with provincial sales taxes in Ontario and British Columbia. Mr. Harper had successful trips to both India and China.

And despite an uproar from environmentalists who say the government is not doing enough to combat global warming, the Prime Minister did not flinch from his position that Canada must keep "realistic" targets that are in line with those of the United States.

That said, Mr. Graves believes the environment is also a potential weakness for Mr. Harper.

"There are a few issues out there that [could] prevent them from getting a majority," he said, "and I put at the top of the list their record on the environment and climate change because it is a ballot booth issue for a large group of Canadians."

More than anything else, Mr. Harper must worry about the unknown unknowns, as they're called: the unforeseeable calamities and challenges ahead that can be the bane of even the most popular politician.

But at the dawn of 2010, nothing out there obviously imperils this Prime Minister's hopes for another very good year.