



Harper's minority on track to break longevity record

GEOFFREY STEVENS

If anyone had told us on the morning of Jan. 24, 2006 that the minority Conservative government we had elected the evening before would still be in office nearly 27 months later, we would have taken the poor soul aside and suggested he or she lie down quietly until the delusion passed.

By the numbers, the incoming Stephen Harper government was just about the weakest of the 12 minorities that have governed Canada since Confederation. Harper won just 36 per cent of the popular vote, the same as Joe Clark in 1979; that was a lower percentage than was recorded by any other winning federal party in Canadian history.

The 36 per cent translated into 40 per cent of the Commons seats, which tied Harper with John Diefenbaker (in 1957) and Mackenzie King (1925) for the lowest proportion of seats won by a party forming the government. Yet the Harper government has survived.

At 27 months, it has outlasted the minority governments of Paul Martin, Clark and Diefenbaker. If it makes it through September, it will surpass the modern-era record holder - Lester Pearson's immensely productive second minority of 1965-68.

I am indebted for these statistics and analysis to Peter Russell, the eminent political scientist, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto and author of the new book "Two Cheers for Minority Government." As the title suggests, Russell is, with some reservations, a fan of minority government, as I am, and he is a bit puzzled, as I am, by Harper's disinclination to accept the cards dealt him in January 2006 and get on with the job.

"Mr. Harper has not been a happy minority government prime minister," Russell writes. "He has made it clear, time and time again, that he would like - and that he needs - a majority government."

To what end? True, governing is easier and more predictable with a majority government; a prime minister can go to dinner without worrying if his administration will fall between the soup and the fish. Or as Russell puts it, "A majority government can stay totally 'on message' - even if that message has been rejected at the polls by a majority of voters.

There is no need to make any concessions to opposing points of view. A majority government will not have to bother with tiresome parliamentary debates or parliamentary committees it cannot control."

Russell draws a distinction between what he calls a "true majority" - a government that has won both a majority of seats and more than 50 per cent of the popular vote (that's happened only three times since the First World War) - and a "false majority" - a government that wins more than one-half of the seats with less than 50 per cent of the vote (as has happened 12 times in the same period).

Given the fact that we now have five competitive national parties, including the Greens (a new Harris/Decima poll has them running ahead of the New Democrats in Ontario), Harper's chances of achieving a "true majority" are non-existent. Even a "false majority" appears to be out of reach, according to the latest numbers from five polling houses. All put the Conservatives shy of the 40-41 per cent of the popular vote that they would need for a majority. One, the Nanos Poll, which was uncannily accurate in the 2006 election (when it was known as SES Research), has the Tories and Liberals tied at 36 per cent nationally, with the Liberals enjoying an 18-point lead in seat-rich Ontario.

That the Conservative minority has survived as long as it has is a tribute to Harper's skill as parliamentary strategist and to the good fortune that has blessed him with the most impotent opposition Ottawa has seen in decades. It's headed by the inept Stéphane Dion, who seems destined to become the first Liberal leader since Edward Blake in the 1880s to fail to become prime minister.

Geoffrey Stevens teaches political science at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph. He welcomes comments at geoffstevens@sympatico.ca