

Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament was a tough political call

January 02, 2010

By William Christian

You have to give Stephen Harper credit: He decides what needs to be done to gain power and to keep it. Then he does it. A Nanos Research poll released on Dec. 30 measured his success. Its poll asked which leader Canadians trusted most, found most competent, or had the best vision for Canada. In all three categories Harper's score was higher than that of Michael Ignatieff's and Jack Layton's combined.

In a message that should be truly frightening for Ignatieff, Canadians found Layton more trustworthy than him, and in terms of what Nanos Research called its leadership index score, Layton held a two-point lead over the Liberal leader in the middle of December, although he was trailing him by 16 points four months earlier. No wonder that Ignatieff admitted that he hadn't had a particularly good year, and that he would have to try harder in 2010.

The prime minister's decision to prorogue Parliament rather than to extend its adjournment or to resume the session when it was planned is just good, tough politics. Since there really aren't any rules for when Parliament should be prorogued, it is impossible to say that Harper broke them. I suppose you might start to get suspicious if the prime minister prorogued parliament more than once a year, or left long periods when he did not have to face the opposition in the House of Commons, but even when that would become a crisis is a matter for argument.

In some ways, parliamentary democracy is what you can get away with. In 1940, Mackenzie King promised he would hold a session of Parliament before calling an election. He concluded that the political situation favoured the Liberals, called Parliament back for a day, announced that constituted a session, and then dissolved Parliament. In the 1960s, Lester Pearson was defeated on a budget measure by what was, in effect, a political trick. Opposition members literally hid behind the curtains in the Commons and then leapt out to vote. Instead of resigning, Pearson introduced a confidence motion, which passed.

Jean Chrétien was king of the opportunistic elections calls, a practice that so infuriated Harper and the Conservatives that they introduced fixed dates for elections, only to find ways round their legislation when it suited them. The Liberals, under Paul Martin, had been defeated in formal constitutional terms before they presented their budget. Martin simply ignored his defeated and induced Belinda Stronach to spurn her party and the man she loved for what she said was the greater good of Canada.

By proroguing Parliament, there is no doubt in my mind that one primary motive that Harper has in mind is to stifle an Afghan inquiry. It is hard to say what his motives are. My personal view is that the allegations of Richard Colvin are extremely serious and need to be examined thoroughly. However, many Canadians aren't concerned with the fate of Afghan prisoners. Their only worry is the well-being of Canada's military personnel in Afghanistan, and another Nanos Research poll released on Dec. 23 indicated that, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means no credibility on the issue of Afghan detainees and 5 means great credibility, the Canadian Armed Forces score 3.35, while the various political parties range from 2.37-2.66.

Is it more important to get at the truth of the Afghan detainee issue, or to preserve the high repute of the Canadian Armed Forces in the minds of the Canadian people? Making decisions like that — and getting them right — is, I suppose, the hallmark of a leader.

William Christian is a former professor of political science at Mount Allison University and the University of Guelph. He writes a blog for historywire.ca

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