

## OPINION

# How to break political stalemate on the Hill? With an opposition coalition

By PAUL LEMAY

VANCOUVER, B.C.—So federal Liberals are thinking about triggering an election in June because, as one of the columnists for *The Hill Times* put it in last week's, they are growing "tired of running from House votes and the Grits want to protect their base on immigration bill," (*The Hill Times*, April 14, p. 1)? But does the contention stand up to careful scrutiny? Recent polls continue to show a statistical tie between the Liberals and Tories, if not an entrenched stalemate. However, national

numbers are often deceiving because they mask province-by-province figures which are seen as a more reliable indicator of what's happening on the ground.

The Conservatives are essentially stuck in Ontario, unable to make any lasting gains, while the same is true for Liberals in Quebec, where the Liberal brand has yet to rebound from the damage caused by the sponsorship scandal, and despite the party's new leader from Quebec. So what is a federal political party leader to do?

If you're Stéphane Dion, bridging the divide between Ontario MPs who are itch-

ing to bring down Harper and Quebec MPs who are looking to keep their seats is vital to his survival as the party's national leader.

If you're Stephen Harper, you've probably gone out and bought a lick-on tattoo that quotes Spanish-American philosopher-essayist George Santayana who once wrote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The tattoo comes with a tiny map of Ontario.

Why Ontario? Think back to September 1990 when a rather self-satisfied two-term Liberal Ontario premier, David Peterson,

called a snap election only three years into a majority 1987 mandate. Turned off by his hubris, voters in protest elected Ontario NDP leader Bob Rae to form the next government. Seasoned observers fell out of their chairs.

Interestingly, Jean Chrétien tempted fate in 2000 when he too called an early election only three years into his 1997 mandate. Yet unlike Peterson, he not only won, but increased the party's total seat count to 174 from 155 nation-wide. So what's the enduring lesson to be drawn? In a line: Ontario voters can be volatile if provoked. And because opinion surveys over the past year have repeatedly shown voters still aren't in the mood for an election, no political party leader wants to tempt such a fate.

So all Harper can do is keep on introducing progressive policies and continue to hammer away at Dion's credibility as leader in hopes that it will ultimately crack his support in the suburban 905-belt around Toronto. And he might just succeed if Dion and his fellow Liberals keep on swallowing those little blue pills he keeps giving them, like the immigration reform package and tacking it to the federal budget bill and making it a confidence motion in the process. Tory policy pills are of course toxic to Liberals.

So far, Harper has been admittedly masterful in his use of the tactic. In chess, it is known as a "pin." For those unfamiliar with the game, this is where you effectively trap two of your opponent's pieces with one of your own, forcing him to move one at the expense of losing another in your next move. And with each bold stroke, Har-

per gets to jab another needle into the Dion voodoo doll that he carries in his briefcase for good luck.

But chess is a two-way game. Harper would have difficulty repelling an opposition coalition. The governor general isn't required to dissolve Parliament if Harper says he no longer has the confidence of the House. The governor general can call upon the leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

A similar very thing occurred in May 1985. Ontario's lieutenant-governor called upon Ontario Liberal leader David Peterson to form a government after he had signed a two-year accord with none other than Ontario NDP leader Bob Rae to dispose of Progressive Conservative premier Frank Miller and his party's 42-year skeletal death grip on the Ontario Legislature.

If the same experiment was tried in Ottawa, it would resolve a lot of opposition party problems. It would solve Jack Layton's immediate problem of volatile voter support for the NDP, and it would also solve Gilles Duceppe's problem of Conservative erosion of their base in Quebec.

And for Dion, the picture would be even rosier. It would solve his go-don't-go dilemma between Ontario and Quebec caucus MPs. He could avoid losing more seats in Quebec. It would relieve Mr. Harper of his prime ministerial duties and the Conservative agenda with which progressives so fundamentally disagree. It could be done without the need of having to call an election, thereby avoiding its cost and the wrath of voters who are either turned off by the idea or who don't want Dion as their next prime minister or both. And it would conserve precious funds for fighting an election down the road, as well as give Liberals time to raise more, thus neutralizing the significant advantage Conservatives now hold on that score.

But the idea does come with a couple of hard-to-over-

come downsides. While most Liberals and NDP supporters would likely find such a proposition tolerable over the short-term, the current party standings in terms of House seats simply does not allow the Liberals and NDP the luxury of going it alone. They need the BQ to make it work. And there's the rub. Federalists entering into a coalition avec les souverainistes is unlikely.

But if the Liberals and NDP did enter into some form of short-term strategic alliance, it would nevertheless alter the dynamics of the overall political chessboard. The Bloc would itself become "pinned," and the Conservatives would be forced to cooperate with the Bloc to stay alive—an optic that could prove especially corrosive to them outside Quebec.

While relations between the NDP and Liberal leadership has often been tense, there is still no getting around the fact that as progressives, neither wants to go on watching the Conservative Party advance a non-progressive political agenda. And they have reason to cooperate. Canada is facing several serious challenges, none-the-least of which is responding more aggressively to the inter-connected challenges of global warming, rapidly rising energy prices due to the dwindling worldwide oil supply and the ripple effect this is already having on global food shortages. Compared to these questions, Liberal or NDP reticence to cooperate appears truly small-minded, if not morally irresponsible.

No, a short-term alliance between these two progressive parties is well worth talking about. The tactic worked in Ontario, and there is little reason to think it might not work again. Otherwise, we might as well just all sit back and accept the Conservative status quo until the autumn of 2009.

Get out your chessboards people. This might take a while.

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## Intellectual Property: CANADA'S 21ST-CENTURY CHALLENGE



AS THE SPEED OF INNOVATION INCREASES, AND ISSUES SURROUNDING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY BECOME EVER MORE COMPLEX, CANADA'S REGULATORY FRAMEWORK MUST CHANGE AND GROW TO MEET THESE CHALLENGES.

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Opening remarks by the Honorable David Wilkins, United States Ambassador to Canada

Speakers and panelists include:

Honourable Perrin Beatty, President, Canadian Chamber of Commerce  
Dr. Michael Shapiro, US Patent and Trademark Office  
Nik Nanos, President and CEO, Nanos Research  
Richard Gold, Professor, Centre for Intellectual Property Policy, McGill University  
Michael Geist, Professor, University of Ottawa

April 28, 2008, Fairmont Chateau Laurier, Ottawa

Please register online at [www.ppforum.ca](http://www.ppforum.ca) by April 24.

## Comparing some of the most recent polls:

### Strategic Counsel for CTV/Globe & Mail

April 15, 2008:

Conservative	36%
Liberal	30%
NDP	15%
BQ	8%
Green 10%	

### Ontario

Conservative	33%
Liberal	42%
NDP	14%
Green	12%

### Québec

Conservative	27%
Liberal	20%
BQ	36%
NDP	16%
Green	10%

### Nanos

April 9, 2008:	
Conservative	36%
Liberal	36%
NDP	14%
Bloc Québécois	8%
Green	6%

### Ipsos Reid for Canwest News Service/ Global National

Nationally (2008.04.12) - Lib. 30% (down 3% since 2008.03); Con. unchanged at 35%; NDP 16% (up 3% from 2008.03); Green 10% (up 2% from 2008.03); in Ontario - Lib. at 38%; Con. 34%; NDP 15% and Green at 11%, while in Québec - Lib. and Con. tied at 23% and BQ 33%.

### Segma for La Presse

April 2008:

In Québec	
Liberal	23%
Conservative	25%
BQ	35%
NDP	13%
Green	10%

### Decima Harris for Canadian Press

April 16, 2008

In Québec	
Liberal	21%
Conservative	21%
BQ	35%
NDP	11%
Green	10%



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