



Prime Minister Stephen Harper poses for a photo. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick

## Uncertainty, risk, recklessness end 2008 political calendar

3 days ago

OTTAWA — And to think the prime minister felt the last House of Commons was dysfunctional.

It seems like a long time ago, but it was only Sept. 7 when Stephen Harper decided it was preferable to ignore his own fixed-date election law rather than permit the 39th Parliament to return for its fall sitting.

Voters, the prime minister said that chilly morning outside Rideau Hall, "will choose between direction or uncertainty; between common sense or risky experiments; between steadiness or recklessness."

Less than four months later, the verdict is in: Uncertainty, risky experiments and recklessness appear to have triumphed.

Whether you're talking about the Conservatives' partisan, stink-bomb-laden fall economic update or the unlikely and unloved opposition coalition it helped spawn, risk, recklessness and uncertainty are the orders of the day as our federal politicians lurch into 2009.

"The irony is we went through an election because of a dysfunctional parliament," pollster Nik Nanos of Nanos Research said in an interview.

"There's a pretty high likelihood we're going to have another election for exactly the same reason."

The House of Commons sat for just 93 of 365 days this year - matching a modern low last set in 2000. But it's not like nothing was resolved as a result of Parliament's virtually unprecedented convulsions over the dying weeks of 2008.

Harper's reputation among the chattering class for strategic and tactical genius - not to mention straight talk - has taken a pummelling.

New Democrats have proven they'll dump their defining policy on shifting the tax burden to corporate ledgers in return for a half-dozen seats at the cabinet table.

The Bloc Quebecois, like some tiresome, pedantic relative, has been rehabilitated within its regional family by the insults of hostile outsiders.

And a Liberal party that was limping along under a lame-duck leader and facing a costly and divisive leadership race suddenly finds itself unified under Michael Ignatieff almost five months ahead of schedule.

How any of these developments will play out in the coming year is the stuff of crystal-ball gazing, not analysis.

But Nanos has his opinion on what could be the winning ballot question in the current economic and political turbulence: "Who can fix the dysfunction?"

The answer looking forward isn't clear, nor does a look back provide easy guide posts.

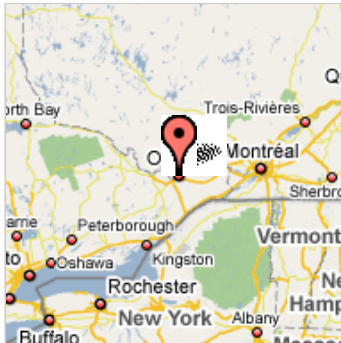
Perhaps the high-water mark in federal politics in 2008 was Parliament's resolution of the future of the Afghanistan military mission.

The Conservative government took the advice of a non-partisan commission headed by former Liberal deputy prime minister John Manley; the Liberal party backed off its initial cast-in-stone 2009 end date; and Harper met the official Opposition halfway.

The Commons voted on Mar. 13 to extend the mission to 2011 while accelerating a shift toward training Afghan troops and police.

True to form, the NDP and Bloc maintained their initial positions and voted against the extension.

It was politics most people could understand - and it in no way served as a model for the rest



of the year.

A series of confrontational confidence motions wracked the Commons all spring and led to an apparent Tory epiphany come summer.

"It's time to inject a new perspective, some new experiences, and give maybe a different point of view for continuing the government," Edmonton Conservative Rahim Jaffer said as the party began its national summer caucus meeting in Levis, Que., at the end of July.

The mantra from MPs in Levis was that the Conservatives wanted to govern, not campaign.

"Either let the current Parliament work and let us get on with our mandate, or the voters themselves will decide," Harper told 1,500 supporters that week at an impressive partisan rally in St-Agapit, Que.

"Mr. Dion must decide to fish or cut bait," he said of the Liberal leader.

But Harper never allowed Stephane Dion to put a line in the water.

On Sept. 7 - a day before three federal byelections were scheduled and a week before MPs were to return after the long summer recess - the prime minister visited the Governor General and dissolved Parliament in favour of an Oct. 14 election.

The date was almost exactly a year earlier than the Oct. 19, 2009, election day laid out in Harper's fixed-date election law - explicitly designed, he'd once said, to keep prime ministers from manipulating the political calendar for partisan advantage.

What followed was a nasty, enervating five-week campaign, punctuated at mid-point by a suddenly escalating global financial crisis, that ended with the lowest voter turnout in federal election history.

Early on the morning of Oct. 15, Harper took to the stage at Calgary's Telus Convention Centre with a strengthened minority mandate.

His 143 MPs in the 308-seat Commons were set against the official Opposition Liberals, reduced to 77 seats and their lowest share of the popular vote since Confederation. It was a Tory victory, but not the clear majority many Harper supporters had hoped for given the demonstrably weak opponent.

"This is a time for us all to put aside political differences and partisan considerations and to work co-operatively for the benefit of Canada," said the prime minister.

"We stretch out a hand to all members of all parties, asking them to join together to protect the economy and weather this world financial crisis."

Harper repeated this soothing political message in the following weeks, and twinned it with a fiscally moderate one from his Finance minister.

"We are not going to engineer a surplus simply for the sake of being able to say that we have a surplus," Jim Flaherty repeated into any microphone that was offered.

Like Charlie Brown rushing in to kick the football against all previous experience, journalists - if not necessarily opposition MPs and the public at large - treated Harper's parliamentary peace placeholder as sincere.

On Nov. 27, ol' Lucy did more than just pull away Charlie Brown's football at the last moment.

The Conservative fall economic update made only the faintest pretext of stimulating a faltering economy while delivering a trio of ideological chop blocks to the opposition and forecasting a highly suspect surplus based on rosy projections and wishful savings. Within three weeks, those surplus projections had been abandoned by Flaherty.

In the meantime, the Conservatives almost immediately dumped the inflammatory cuts to the public per-vote subsidy for political parties and a ban on public-service strikes - but not before a nascent coalition involving the Liberals and NDP, backed by the Bloc, had been jump-started.

As Harper succinctly observed while serving as Opposition leader in 2005: "You don't slip controversial provisions into omnibus legislation if you are serious about making a minority Parliament work."

In late November 2008, his opponents agreed.

The unwieldy coalition promised to defeat the Tories in a non-confidence vote and asked Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean to consider lame-duck Dion the prime-minister-in-waiting. It was

such a sudden, head-spinning turn of events that Harper successfully persuaded Jean to pull the plug on MPs for the second time in exactly three months, thus dodging a scheduled non-confidence vote and setting a troubling constitutional precedent.

It was also another dramatic about-face for Harper, who once compellingly argued that a prime minister must hold the confidence of the Commons on any given day, otherwise he loses the moral authority to govern.

The pause provided by the Governor General's timely prorogation has hardly been tranquil:

-The Liberals unceremoniously dumped Dion and installed Ignatieff as leader.

-Harper let it be known he'd stuff the Senate with 18 appointed Tory partisans after fruitlessly waiting for elected senators.

-The coalition threat, however tenuous, continues to dangle.

-Consultations for a Jan. 27 federal budget are underway.

When parliamentarians return to Ottawa at the end of January, all signs point to a poisoned chalice.

"We've got a prime minister who continues to say one thing and do another," fumed NDP MP David Christopherson.

"They have shown at every opportunity when they were expected to work with people that they go for the jugular," said Liberal Mark Holland.

Harper, for his part, indicated in one year-end interview that the incendiary cuts to party subsidies may be delayed, but not forgotten.

"In terms of the political financing measures, we believe these are in the public interest and the public overwhelmingly supports these measures," he told CTV's Atlantic bureau.

Nanos the pollster suggests all parties advance with caution.

He views post-prorogation polls that boosted Harper's Conservatives comfortably into majority support territory with skepticism, saying they reflect public disgust with a Dion-led coalition government more than a Tory endorsement.

As for the all-consuming national debate sparked by the fiscal update and the coalition threat, Nanos doesn't infer that will boost dismal voter turnout should there be another election any time soon.

"I don't think we should confuse anger with action," said the pollster.

It could be the epitaph for federal politics in 2008.