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**FEDERAL POLITICS**

# Good grief, it was a dysfunctional year in Ottawa

Dec 27, 2008 04:30 AM

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**BRUCE CHEADLE**  
 THE CANADIAN PRESS

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, said the Prime Minister, "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 Québécois, 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 months ahead of schedule.






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 March 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.

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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," Rahim Jaffer, then the Conservative MP for Edmonton Strathcona, said at the end of July.

But on Sept. 7 – a day before three federal by-elections 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 but with a strengthened minority mandate for Harper.

"This is a time for us all to put aside political differences and partisan considerations and to work cooperatively for the benefit of Canada," said Harper.

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 Finance Minister Jim 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.

The unwieldy coalition promised to defeat the Tories in a non-confidence vote and asked Governor General Michaëlle Jean to consider lame-duck Stéphane 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.

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

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 anytime soon.

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

It could be the epitaph for federal politics in 2008.

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