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Columnists

Harper is architect of parliamentary dysfunction



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PRIME Minister Stephen Harper is rushing Canada into an October election on the pretext that Parliament is dysfunctional. But it's his government, and particularly, Harper himself, who are the chief engineers of parliamentary dysfunction.

Over a year ago, he ordered his office to draft a 200-page blueprint for disrupting and denigrating the work of committees. Then he ordered it circulated to all Conservative committee chairs. Its advice runs the gamut from denying quorums to shutting committees down by ordering chairs to flee the room, and from instructing Conservative witnesses not to appear to telling them to appear on the wrong day or at the wrong hour or both.

If the chair is an opposition MP, then the advice for all Conservatives is to treat the committee with disrespect and derision, including shouting and/or refusing to leave.

This recipe for dysfunction reached its apotheosis recently with the contemptuous behaviour of Conservative MPs and witnesses before the ethics committee examining the Conservatives' alleged abuse of more than \$1 million in taxpayers' dollars for election advertising in 2006.

But the Harper-engendered dysfunction reaches beyond committees to Parliament itself. Fulfilling his election promise to the red-meat remnants of the old Reform party, the prime minister early in his mandate inserted what he knew was a Trojan horse right into the centre of Canadian parliamentary democracy -- the fixed election date.

In one fell swoop, as many constitutional and parliamentary experts warned him, he turned the central dynamic of our system of government on its head, robbing the sitting prime minister of the ultimate authority inherent in responsible government, the ability to dissolve Parliament to overcome obstruction -- or dysfunction.

Harper's fixed election law transferred that power to the opposition leaders. Then Harper compounded the error by committing Joe Clark's fatal mistake; believing he could govern as if he had a majority although he only had a minority. Canadian minority governments of recent memory worked because the largest party recognized it had to strike accommodations with one or more opposition parties.

Harper, who apparently relishes his growing reputation as a schoolyard bully, isn't about to negotiate anything with anyone unless the negotiation itself is a partisan coup.

So, for over a year, the prime minister has been trying to force his own government's defeat. The Liberals have been refusing to oblige him, preferring (surprise, surprise) to use their new-found power to decide dissolution to choose the date best for them, not their chief opponent.

Frustrated past endurance, Harper has recently taken to complaining about the tyranny of the majority. Given the prime minister's predilection for brass knuckle partisanship without limit, this is, to say the least, disingenuous.

Any tyranny is antithetical to democratic forms. Most particularly antithetical to those norms is the tyranny of a minority that assumes the right to proceed as if it is the majority, refusing to bend or compromise on anything with anyone. And that last definition fits the Harperites like a glove.

So now Harper is bemoaning his own fixed election date law, saying it only works in a majority government situation. But he was just three months into his minority mandate when he boasted about its many noble democratic features. "Fixed election dates stop leaders from trying to manipulate the calendar," he said in Victoria in May 2006. "They level the playing field for all parties."

Last week, the prime minister set out yet another far-fetched election rationalization in his shop window. He's free to call an election because, suddenly, he can't get his agenda passed. But that, too, doesn't accord with the facts. He has gotten almost everything he presented to Parliament through except for his crime bills. Even the Conservatives' many friends in the media note that Harper has achieved the bulk of his electoral platform -- as much, therefore, as most majority governments manage -- and has little but scraps left. Or if he does have more, he's unwilling to share it with Parliament and the public.

Is Harper panicking, as Liberal leader Stéphane Dion says? Respected pollsters Harris-Decima and Nanos Research both put the Liberals in the lead just last week. Is he afraid of all the scandals bubbling away merrily on every burner on the Conservative stove? Afraid U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama will win in November? Afraid of bad economic news? A deficit?

Or is he following the disturbingly anti-democratic and sinister playbook of his longtime friend and mentor, University of Calgary political scientist Tom Flanagan? Flanagan told Canadian Press Harper is betting on an increased minority, "enough to throw the Liberals into turmoil," giving the prime minister "a virtually free hand in Parliament" and an opportunity to launch "a prolonged war of attrition" ending in the Liberals' destruction.

Whatever the reason, the need for an election now -- subsuming four costly byelections -- has nothing to do with anything he's telling Canadians right now.

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