



Canada's Minority Government – Yet another Election?

By Alex Münter¹

- Canadian federal politics is currently dominated by pre-election positioning as parliamentary stalemate over the environment, social policy and anti-terror policies creates increasingly acrimonious political debate. With no party able to muster a clear majority in Parliament, Canada could well face its third election in as many years.
- Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has scheduled this year's federal budget just one week before the March 26 Québec provincial election. The timing of the budget, in concert with a Québec election, is an unusual and audacious move designed to help secure a federalist victory in Québec and boost the Conservative party's flagging fortunes in that key province.
- The House of Commons must adopt the government's budget or an election automatically takes place, so the budget will likely be an election-oriented spending plan. Mr. Harper is expected to increase federal funding to the provinces (most particularly Québec), boost military spending, battle climate change, pay down debt and cut middle-class taxes.
- Mr. Harper has changed course on the issue of the environment. Not a Conservative priority during his first year in office, Mr. Harper has recognized the salience of the issue to the Canadian electorate. He has appointed a new Environment Minister – one of the government's strongest performers and most competent ministers, John Baird.
- The Prime Minister has strongly supported Canada's participation in the war in Afghanistan, involving about 2,500 Canadian troops. He decided last year to extend Canada's role there until February 2009. Two-thirds of Canadians believe that Canada is shouldering too much of the burden in Afghanistan and that NATO allies are doing too little.

A country characterized for decades by strong majority governments, Canada will soon mark the third anniversary of unstable parliaments, governments unable to implement their agendas and political parties in perpetual campaign mode.

On the Road to New Elections?

The January 2006 federal election replaced a shaky Liberal minority government with a Conser-

vative government that is outnumbered 3:2 by the opposition parties in the House of Commons. Because of a British-style first-past-the-post electoral system and no tradition of governing coalitions, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government must secure the support of at least one of the three opposition parties in order to pass legislation and stay in office. This is typically done on an issue-by-issue basis but an increa-

singly adversarial and confrontational tone in Parliament is making such co-operation difficult.

As a result, Ottawa is currently gripped by a near-permanent frenzy of election speculation. All political parties are presently nominating election candidates, preparing their platforms and even running election-style television advertising. The instability of the minority government has dominated national media coverage, reducing the room for policy discussions. Even policy questions are largely analyzed by the national news media on the basis of their impact on the fragile political environment, rather than their substance.

However, public opinion polls suggest that another election today could result in a continuation of parliamentary stalemate. There is also the possibility of an even-more fragmented House of Commons through the potential arrival there of a fifth political formation, the surging Green Party which is currently drawing the support of well over one in ten voters, according to most public opinion polls.

Interestingly, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has continued to build personal credibility as the strongest federal leader. However, his party generally scores worse in opinion surveys than it performed at the polls in January 2006. Thus the Conservative Party has increasingly sought to make an issue of leadership and character, hoping it can frame the next election around each party leader's personal qualities.

Mr. Harper has made clear his over-riding goal is to secure a majority of seats in Parliament in the next federal election. A shrewd and partisan tactician, Mr. Harper has pursued issues designed to split the opposition parties and is positioning his government to try to win the 30 extra Parliamentary seats it needs to form a majority.

Party Perspectives on an Election

An election will be triggered if the government loses the confidence of the House of Commons, meaning all three opposition parties must agree to defeat the government and force an election. Alternately, the Conservatives could engineer their own defeat over an issue which differentiates them from all other parties and

carves out a large enough swath of public opinion to be able to prevail. Given the proliferation of political parties, winning 40% to 42% of the total votes cast would likely secure a majority in Parliament. Through the month of February, weekly opinion polls by Decima Research Inc. gave the Conservatives an average level of support of 33%, compared to 30% for the Liberals. However, the trend line is positive for the Conservatives and negative for the Liberals.

Mr. Harper insists he has no desire for another election. Nor does it seem to be in the interest of any of the parliamentary opposition parties:

1- After an impressive start last December, newly-elected Liberal leader Stéphane Dion – who handled contentious issues like the environment, bilingualism and Québec independence as a federal cabinet minister – has so far failed to catch the imagination of the electorate. A former academic, Mr. Dion has pledged to present a national platform built on the three pillars of economic prosperity, environmental sustainability and social justice. He has also accused Mr. Harper of pursuing a neoconservative, George-Bush-style agenda that is out of step with Canadian values.

2- The third party in Canada (though fourth-ranked party in seats in the House of Commons) is the left-of-centre New Democratic Party (NDP), under the leadership of Jack Layton. It has most recently used its clout in the minority Parliament to push the government towards stronger action on the climate change crisis. While Mr. Layton frequently outperforms the other party leaders, it is often difficult for the NDP to succeed in making its voice heard with only 29 of 308 seats in Parliament and no plausible prospect of forming the next government. To complicate matters, a surging Green Party threatens to siphon votes from all the other parties but draws the most from the NDP.

3- The pro-sovereignty Bloc Québécois works cooperatively with the provincial Parti Québécois, which is currently fighting a difficult provincial election campaign in Québec. While the Bloc is an avowedly separatist political party, its value proposition to federal voters in Québec is slightly different: it promises to defend the interests of Québeckers in the federal Parliament, fighting for a better deal for Québec while making clear that its sovereignist goals will only be achieved in

Québec, not in the federal capital. Thus many Québec voters who are not in favour of Québec independence nevertheless back the party because it fights for their province in Ottawa.

Already holding an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats in rural areas and in Western Canada, the Conservatives can only form a majority government by making electoral gains in urban Ontario, where they hold almost no seats, and in the province of Québec, where they currently hold just 10 of 75 seats.

In his first year in office, Mr. Harper's policy positions often placed him well outside the Québec consensus. Québeckers overwhelmingly oppose Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan; Mr. Harper extended the mission. Québeckers strongly back the Kyoto protocol; Mr. Harper derides it. Québeckers are overwhelmingly secular and liberal on social issues; Mr. Harper unsuccessfully tried to re-open the issue of same-sex marriage in Parliament.

But Mr. Harper has been engaged in a charm offensive to seduce Québec voters since the fall. He started with a parliamentary resolution, which was remarkably adopted almost unanimously, which recognizes the Québécois people as a "nation" within Canada. A long-standing demand of the Québec political class, it remains to be seen how this new recognition of Québec's specificity will play out in public policy.

The Use of the Federal Budget as Incentive

Mr. Harper has also worked closely with the federalist premier of Québec, who is engaged in a tough battle for re-election. Mr. Harper has scheduled this year's federal budget to be presented one week before the March 26 Québec provincial election. Mr. Harper's Finance Minister has made clear that the budget will address the "fiscal imbalance" that provincial governments, including Québec's, have long complained about. Canada's ten provincial premiers have watched federal surpluses pile up for nearly a decade while their own treasuries have struggled with deficits to meet the rising costs of services like health and education. The premiers have long argued that the Canadian federation has become unbalanced with a federal government collecting more revenue than it needs, while provinces struggle with the opposite problem. Mr. Harper is a long-time advocate of a smaller federal

government, devolution and more provincial power. He has readily agreed with the premiers' assessment.

The timing of the federal budget in concert with a Québec provincial election is an audacious move, which Mr. Harper hopes will both help secure a federalist victory in the provincial election while boosting his own party's fortunes in that province.

Acknowledging the Climate Change

Mr. Harper has also changed course on the issue of the environment. Not at all a Conservative priority during his first year in office, Mr. Harper has recognized the salience of the issue to the Canadian electorate. The clear worldwide consensus over global-warming – underscored by an unseasonably warm start to the usually-frigid Canadian winter plus the success of environmental activists – has vaulted the environmental agenda to the top of public consciousness. Many recent polls rate it as the number one priority for voters.

Mr. Harper is clearly trying to blur the distinctions between political parties on this issue. While it is unlikely that Canadians will come to see the Conservatives as a "green" party, it is imperative for his political fortunes that the Conservatives no longer be perceived as "brown". To this end, he appointed a new Environment Minister in January – one of the government's strongest performers and most competent ministers, John Baird. The government is beefing up its proposed Clean Air Act and has been busily announcing new environmental programs over the past couple of months. Mr. Baird has been working on new industry regulations, expected to be announced before the end of the month. He has ruled out a carbon tax or a carbon emissions trading plan and the government has been examining "intensity-based" emissions guidelines. Such regulations would limit emissions produced for each barrel of oil or megawatt of electricity, but would not put a cap on total emissions.

The opposition parties have joined forces to castigate the government for its refusal to conform to the Kyoto Protocol's deadlines and targets. In mid-February, legislation was passed in Parliament (with only the Conservatives voting against) obliging the government to meet Canada's Kyoto commitments. The Conservatives say that it is impossible to meet the

international treaty's requirements without damaging the Canadian economy and say they will not be bound by the new law nor the international treaty. The Conservatives also routinely attack the opposition Liberals because Canada's greenhouse gas emissions actually rose by 30% during 13 years of Liberal government, despite the former government's support of Kyoto which promised a six per cent decline in emissions below 1990 levels. The Conservatives' counter-attack has complicated the issue a difficult one for Liberal leader Stéphane Dion, a former federal environment minister.

Indeed the Liberal environmental record is the centerpiece of a series of harshly-worded, U.S.-style television attack advertisements that target Mr. Dion as weak and indecisive. Attack ads are nothing new in Canadian politics; the Liberals used devastatingly effective ones to defeat Mr. Harper in the 2004 federal election. However, it is unusual for such advertising to air outside of an election campaign. The advertising strategy is a reflection of the overall sense in Ottawa that an election could happen at any time because of the fragile political situation.

Other Issues: Budget, Security and Canada's Engagement in Afghanistan

To prepare for the possibility of defeat in the House of Commons, the government's March 19 federal budget will likely be designed as an election-friendly spending plan. Under Canada's parliamentary system, the House of Commons must adopt the government's budget or an election automatically takes place. Mr. Harper's budget is expected to "restore fiscal balance" in the federation, boost military spending, demonstrate progress in battling climate change, pay down debt and deliver middle-class tax cuts. The Liberals have already indicated they plan to oppose the budget and the NDP will be hard-pressed to support a government that is anathema to its social democratic voting base. That may well leave the fate of the government, and the triggering of a spring election, in the hands of the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Harper has sought to portray the opposition parties, most particularly the Liberals, as being soft on crime and soft on terrorism. Most recently, he attacked the Liberals because of their refusal to support the extension of clauses in Canada's

anti-terrorism legislation, which expired at the end of February. The Conservatives sought to extend the measures – which allow the police to detain terror suspects without charge and which allow judges to force suspects to testify – for a further three years. The Liberals, NDP and Bloc Québécois argued that these measures are a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and that they are unnecessary since they have never been used since first being introduced in 2002. The opposition parties used their combined clout to block Mr. Harper's proposed extension.

The Prime Minister has sought to link such measures with Canada's participation in the war in Afghanistan, which involves about 2,500 Canadian troops, almost all of them in Kandahar province. Mr. Harper decided last year to extend Canada's mission there until February 2009. Forty-five Canadians have died in the counter-insurgency operation.

While the former Liberal government initiated the mission, Mr. Harper has been a vocal champion of the effort. He has visited Afghanistan, as have a steady stream of senior cabinet ministers. His insistent promotion of Canada's military involvement has helped stabilize eroding support for the mission (particularly amongst loyal Conservative voters) but pollster Angus Reid reported in late February that two-thirds of Canadians believe that Canada is shouldering too much of the burden in Afghanistan and that NATO allies are doing too little. A clear majority of Canadians (54%) also believe that the government has failed to justify Canada's involvement there; while 27% think it has. Most Canadians continue to wonder how Canada can succeed where military superpowers like Britain, the USSR and the United States have not.

The opposition NDP and Bloc Québécois are calling for immediate Canadian troop withdrawals. Mr. Dion, who opposed the extension of Canada's involvement until 2009, now says he will honor that commitment if elected Prime Minister. However, he says a Liberal government will end Canada's military presence in 2009. Mr. Dion has evidently concluded that Canadians remain overwhelmingly skeptical of the effort and don't agree that participation there is vital to Canada's security interests. Particularly in areas where the Conservatives must gain ground in order to win a majority government,

urban Ontario and Québec, the war continues to contribute to the impression that Mr. Harper's foreign policy is too similar to that of President George W. Bush.

Whether an election will be held this spring, on whose terms and on what issue remains anybody's guess. What is without doubt, however, is that each political party is getting ready for the eventuality and many believe it could well become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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