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Leadership and the Coalition Crisis:
An Analysis of the November 2008 Attempt to Form a Coalition Government



The federal Opposition parties' attempt to form a coalition government in November 2008, the "coalition crisis" as the media labelled this event, inadvertently revealed the consequence of Canada's failure to reach a consensus on the challenging philosophical questions of leadership and representation in our democracy. The crisis developed when the Opposition parties of the House of Commons, the Liberal Party of Canada (Liberals), the New Democratic Party of Canada (NDP) and the Bloc Québécois (Bloc), signed a coalition agreement indicating that the Opposition would not support the governing Conservative Party of Canada's (Conservatives) economic legislation. The potential for a Liberal-NDP coalition to form a new government provoked a debate between proponents of parliamentary democracy and electoral democracy over the coalition's legitimacy. I aim to prove that while the attempted coalition government was legitimate according to a perspective of parliamentary democracy, the coalition's legitimacy was challenged by an electoral vision of democracy that focused on leadership in order to strengthen the position of the governing Conservatives. The role that leadership played in undermining the validity of the proposed coalition government will become evident through an analysis of the events of the coalition crisis. Firstly, I must prove that the Liberal-NDP led coalition was compatible with principles of parliamentary democracy and general theories of coalitions in parliamentary systems. I must also address the circumstances of the time which were conducive for the Conservatives to espouse a vision of electoral democracy, a vision that questioned the concept of leadership in Canadian parliamentary democracy. In the end, the potential to resolve the issue of representation was suspended because the crisis was resolved through the reinforcement of parliamentary principles to overcome confusion over the two perspectives of democracy.

The formation of a coalition agreement by Opposition parties was compatible with principles of Canadian parliamentary democracy. The initial cause of the crisis illustrated that there is a democratic element supporting the Canadian parliamentary system of government, notably

through the legitimization of the Opposition as representatives of the electoral will. On November 27, 2008, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced the fall fiscal update, which contained contentious provisions to curtail government spending, such as the suspension of federal servants' right to strike until 2011 and the elimination of the \$1.95 per vote subsidy to support political parties that receive more than two percent of the vote.¹ These proposals conflicted with Opposition parties' platforms and unbalanced their financial ability to compete in an election in favour of the better funded Conservative Party, creating a bias in campaigning that the Opposition parties determined to be undemocratic. The update also did not include a stimulus package, which the Opposition thought was an essential measure to minimizing the effects of the global economic recession.

In the Canadian parliamentary system of government, the Opposition's role is to monitor the government for arbitrary and undemocratic abuses of power through the practice of withholding funding approval for government legislation. This constitutional and historical right of the Opposition reflects the notion that all MPs are legitimate representatives of their constituents. Thus each MP is influenced by the impetus of future election results to sway legislation in their constituents' favour. In order to pass legislation, a government, particularly a minority government that does not hold the majority of seats in the House of Commons, attempts to promote policies that have the widest possible range of acceptance so that it can garner the majority of MPs' support. From this perspective, the fall fiscal update should also have attempted to reflect the will of the electorate that did not vote for MPs in the Conservative minority government, which was 61.4 per cent of participants in the fortieth federal election.² Such an attempt was not evident to the Opposition. Based on the constitutionality of the Opposition's role in the Canadian parliamentary

¹ "Federal Government still projecting surpluses - but no guarantees" *CBC News*, Thursday November 27, <http://www.cbc.ca/money/story/2008/11/27/econoupdat.html>.

² Peter H. Russell, "Learning to Live with Minority Parliaments," in *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*, ed. Lorne Sossin and Peter Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 136.

system, the Opposition parties possessed a legitimate right to represent their supporters by contesting the provisions of the fall fiscal update.

The Opposition parties' reaction of claiming non-confidence and of creating a coalition agreement also conforms to principles of Canadian parliamentary democracy. The lynch-pin principle of parliamentary democracy is responsible government, which means that the government is accountable to the MPs in the House of Commons and through the MPs to the electorate.

Professor Emeritus at Queen's University C.E.S. Franks explains the concept of responsible government as indicating that

[t]he safeguard against [Cabinet's] abuse lies in the relationship between parliament and government... ministers are not only responsible *for* the use of [their] powers, but are also responsible and accountable *to* parliament. Parliament, and particularly the House of Commons, is consequently... the source of the legitimacy and authority of a government... A cabinet must have the support of a majority in parliament.³

Franks highlights that the Opposition parties' support of the government is a necessary source of legitimacy in the system of parliamentary government. When the government possesses the support of the majority of the MPs, the government is said to have the confidence of the House. The most evident way of monitoring confidence and testing the legitimacy of the government in place is via the use of a declared confidence vote. The Opposition parties of November 2008, in declaring that the Conservative government did not have the confidence of the House of Commons, were announcing their intention to defeat the government by not voting to support the proposed financial legislation.

According to parliamentary precedence, the fall fiscal update is a "money matters" bill that is subject to a confidence vote. A situation of non-confidence, affirmed by the loss of a declared confidence vote, can have two consequences. Either the prime minister may request that the governor general dissolve Parliament, thus an election would ensue, or the prime minister may

³ C.E.S. Franks, *The Parliament of Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 11.

declare non-confidence to the governor general who can call upon the Official Opposition to govern if the Opposition demonstrates viable support of the House.⁴ This means that Governor General Michaëlle Jean had the power to call upon the Official Opposition, the Liberals, to form government. Prime Minister Stephen Harper would not object to the constitutionality of the Opposition to act as an alternative to government in light of his own letter to Governor General Adrienne Clarkson as leader of the Official Opposition in 2004. This letter advised the Governor General to consider all her options should the Liberal minority government lose the confidence of the House, because all of the Opposition parties, which constituted the majority of the House, were in close consultation.⁵ Therefore, under parliamentary democracy the Opposition parties monitor the government in place by acting as a viable replacement that may be called upon by the Governor General after the loss of a non-confidence vote without an election having to take place.

Given that the Liberal party did not command the plurality of seats in the House, and the party's weakest performance in history during the previous federal election, the Opposition's viability depended on the formation of a partnership with the other Opposition parties to constitute a majority of the electorate. Considering that the public had very recently participated in an election, the possibility of another costly expenditure was unfavourable to the public during a time of economic uncertainty. A coalition government would have prevented another election from being called upon the prime minister's resignation, demonstrating the influence of the electorate's will on decision-making in parliamentary democracy. Therefore, the formation of a coalition was an attempt to form a viable alternative to the government in place. Therefore, the Opposition's formation of a coalition in November 2008 was compatible with principles of Canadian parliamentary democracy.

⁴ Thomas D'Aquino, G. Bruce Doern and Cassandra Blair, *Parliamentary Democracy in Canada: Issues for Reform*. (Toronto: Methuen, 1983), 3.

⁵ Jane Taber et al., "Opposition sets coalition terms." *Globe and Mail*, December 1, 2008, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/article724889.ece>.

While the attempt to form a Liberal-NDP coalition government with Bloc support was legitimate according to principles of parliamentary democracy, this type of political formation is almost unheard of in Canadian federal politics, bringing a new dimension to Canadian politics that was unfamiliar to voters. The only example of a formal coalition at the federal level is an outdated experience beyond most Canadians living memory. Academics refer to the Unionist Government of 1917 to demonstrate the presence of coalitions in Canadian federal government. However, even this example must be nuanced, as the Union Government was an alliance created by a large defection of Anglophone Liberals that joined the Conservative party in order to pass conscription legislation.⁶ Furthermore, the controversial nature of the issue consigned coalitions to be an unpopular political formation. As University of South Australia Professor Sunil Kumar suggests in his comparative study of coalitions in parliamentary governments, “[t]he inept handling of the conscription crisis by the alliance government was attributed to its coalitional nature and Canadian electorates started viewing [coalitions]...with a great deal of apprehension”.⁷

To promote understanding of how coalitions are compatible with Canadian parliamentary democracy, it is necessary to define how the attempt at a coalition government qualifies as such. According to a study of coalition formation in parliamentary governments, conducted by Professor Ian Budge of the University of Essex and political scientist M.J. Laver, formal coalitions can be categorized into two main types: legislative coalitions “which sustain the government in office” and executive coalitions which are “the collection of parties which between them make up the cabinet” according to the relative proportion of their seats in parliament.⁸ As political scientist Lawrence C. Dodd describes, “In a parliament with no majority party, the quest by each party for secure participation in and control of the cabinet becomes a search...for ‘a coalition of natural

⁶ Rand Dyck, *Canadian Politics: Critical Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Scarborough: Nelson Thompson Learning, 2000), 86.

⁷ Sunil Kumar, *Parties and Coalition Politics: A Comparative Study*, (New Delhi: Uppal, 2004), 118.

⁸ M.J. Laver and Ian Budge, *Party Policy and Government Coalition*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 5.

allies' ...[i]mmediately upon the conclusion of the electoral stage".⁹ Therefore the coalition formation process begins after the parties have an indication of the electorate's will and coalitions are not required to be announced before the election. The process of forming a coalition follows the minimal winning theory under which coalition actors "seek to enter a coalition of parties that has a reliable majority yet contains no party in the coalition that is unnecessary to majority status" and strive to align themselves in order to adopt policies as close to their own preferred policy as possible.¹⁰ Professor of Political Studies at the University of Toronto Lawrence Leduc describes coalition compositions as either the partnership of a large party and a smaller party, which usually occurs in a party system that has two dominant parties as does Canada, or a partnership between multiple parties, where the focus is more on the coalition agreement in order to direct policy and represent broader range of the electorate.¹¹

In the November 2008 attempt at a coalition government, outlined in a signed document by all three Opposition parties and presented to the governor general, the formal executive coalition consisted of the partnership between the larger Liberal party and the smaller NDP, because there was a projected sharing of cabinet seats according to parties' relative seating in the House of Commons. The executive coalition, set to expire June 30, 2011 unless renewed, projected a situation where the Official Opposition leader Stéphane Dion would be prime minister; eighteen cabinet seats would be assigned to Liberals (including that of the Minister of Finance); and six cabinet seats and six Parliamentary secretaries would be assigned to the NDP.¹² The Bloc's written commitment to not defeat the Liberal-NDP coalition for a period of eighteen months is defined as a

⁹ Lawrence C. Dodd, *Coalitions in Parliamentary Government*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 35-36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ Lawrence Leduc, "Coalitional Government: When It Happens, How It Works," in *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*, ed. Lorne Sossin and Peter Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 127-128.

¹² "Liberals, NDP, Bloc sign deal on proposed coalition," *CBC News*, December 1, 2008.
<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/12/01/coalition-talks.html>.

legislative coalition because the agreement was based on supporting the proposed coalition government which the Bloc was not to be part of.¹³ With the notable exception of the Bloc's objective of Quebec sovereignty, the parties were, in essence, ideologically leftist in their perception of the main parliamentary issue. All Opposition parties contended that a stimulus package was necessary to counter the effects of global economic recession. Therefore, the November 2008 attempt to form a coalition was in accordance with general theories about coalition formation in parliamentary governments.

Also important to note is that informal legislative coalition building processes are a necessary and already existing aspect to parliamentary life. As University of Toronto Professor Peter H. Russell argues, the increasing frequency of minority governments due to a fractured electorate - half of the eighteen federal elections since 1957 have resulted in minority governments – arithmetically necessitates coalition practices be employed to pass proposed legislation and ensure government stability.¹⁴ For example, Pierre Trudeau's Liberal minority government from 1972 to 1974 and that of Paul Martin from 2004-2006 governed largely based on the support of the NDP.¹⁵ Under the parliamentary principle of confidence and of consent in responsible government, Canadians would have been subject to a far greater number of elections in this time period without coalitional practices. Moreover, considering Canada's fractured electorate and the probability of recurring minority governments, coalitions are likely to become a more intrinsic aspect to Canadian politics. As former Reform Party leader and proponent of electoral democracy Preston Manning states, "one of the principal ways of getting things done politically in the first part of the 21st century will be through the building of principled coalitions."¹⁶ However, as academics such as

¹³ "Liberals, NDP, Bloc sign deal on proposed coalition."

¹⁴ Peter H. Russell, "Learning to Live with Minority Parliaments," 136.

¹⁵ Lawrence Leduc, "Coalitional Government: When It Happens, How It Works," 124.

¹⁶ David E. Smith, *The People's House of Commons: Theories of Democracy in Contention*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 53.

Russell are keen to demonstrate using the infamous Ipsos-reid poll that determined 51% of surveyed Canadians incorrectly identified the prime minister as elected directly, Canadians lack sufficient knowledge of their political system to be able to recognize that coalitional practices are compatible with their parliamentary democracy, in which voters elect a Member of Parliament in single member plurality constituencies.¹⁷

However, a valid criticism of the coalition attempt of November 2008 needs to be addressed. Although coalitions are compatible with parliamentary democracy, the practice of informal legislative coalitions at the federal level of government usually contain the governing party with a plurality of seats in the House of Commons. A contention that arose with the proposed coalition government was that the party containing the plurality of votes and of seats, the governing Conservatives, was evidently not included. This implies that although the majority of the electorate did not vote for the Conservatives, there is a representative function and governing right associated with the party that receives the most votes in an election. The unpopularity of the coalition because of this leadership component requires further examination of the electoral theory of democracy espoused by the Conservatives and the circumstances of the time that were conducive for this theory to take hold.

Electoral democracy envisions a greater empowerment of the electorate in choosing their representatives, however lacks a strongly coherent method of achieving this vision. As Carleton University Professor William Cross explains, electoral democracy is the product of dissatisfied and anti-elitist voters who advocate a greater grassroots democracy because voters “generally do not believe that Canadian politics [is] sufficiently inclusive of and responsive to voters”.¹⁸ While, increasingly smaller voter turnouts seem to indicate that this sentiment of dissatisfaction has its

¹⁷ Peter H. Russell, “Learning to Live with Minority Parliaments,” 142.

¹⁸ *Political Parties, Representation, and Electoral Democracy in Canada*, edited by William Cross, (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

merits, the perspective of electoral democracy lacks a central structure that would assist in responding to this issue. Electoral democracy lacks weight in the face of a traditionally and historically supported parliamentary democracy because it is seemingly undefined in proposals for comprehensive reform. As University of Saskatchewan professor David Smith indicates in his work, *The People's House of Commons: Theories of Democracy in Contention*, electoral democracy is a “utilitarian term intended to encompass instruments of direct democracy, such as initiative, referendum, and recall as well as a philosophy of popular rule.”¹⁹ In this sense, the perspective of electoral democracy reflects a delegate theory of representation that purports MPs have limited ability to use their own judgement to respond to the wishes of the electorate. Rather, MPs are restricted to a direct conveyance of their constituents' will, which is often ever-changing and not easily measured or responded to in times of crisis.

Yet the circumstances at the time were conducive for this broad vision of electoral democracy to be taken up the government as a line of defence. Given the lack of experience with formal coalitions in Canadian federal politics, the public's lack of knowledge about their system of government and the destabilizing effect that the potential coalition government may have had on government's function in times of economic uncertainty, it is unsurprising a large portion of the public received the coalition apprehensively. More importantly, the proximity and frustrating nature of the fortieth federal election on October 14, 2008, also influenced the public's sceptical reception of the coalition. According to Globe and Mail journalist, Michael Valpy, the election was disappointing in the sense that it appeared as though the result was unchanged from before the election; the Conservative party received another minority mandate, slightly elevated from 127 to 143 seats.²⁰

¹⁹ David E. Smith, *The People's House of Commons: Theories of Democracy in Contention*, 55.

²⁰ Michael Valpy, “The ‘Crisis’: A Narrative”, in *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*, ed. Lorne Sossin and Peter Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5.

The campaign leading up to the October 14 election is crucial to understanding the impact questions of legitimate leadership had on the way the public received the coalition. During the election, as Valpy describes, “the public opinion polls consistently showed that Canadians were not enthusiastic about the leaders of either of the two major parties...If anything, the quality of leadership was the election’s ballot-box issue: Dion was seen by a significant portion of voters as not leader-like and Harper, while clearly preferred over Dion, was unable to overcome substantial doubts as to his trustworthiness.”²¹ The dissatisfaction of the voters with their choice of candidates is perhaps demonstrated by the lowest voter turnout in the history of Canadian federal election, a turnout of 59.1 per cent.²²

The antagonistic nature of the campaign, in particular the heightened extent of the use of attack-ads centered on leadership, was still fresh in public memory at the time the coalition crisis was unfolding. Dion was particularly vilified during this campaign, and the Liberals suffered their worst popular-vote in history, shrinking from 103 to 77 seats, as a result.²³ The rivalry comparison between the two major party leaders was reflected once again in the media with the major party leaders’ television addresses on December 3. The high quality images of Harper appeared more dignified; the television address invoked images of strong leader versus Dion’s last minute and disorganized follow-up.²⁴ The question of leadership and Dion’s unpopularity had an impact on the viability of the coalition and the philosophical discourse that would split the electorate during the crisis because he had already indicated he would step down as leader in May, 2009. An EKOS poll conducted for the CBC found that 60 per-cent of Canadians were in favour of Dion stepping down

²¹ Michael Valpy, “The ‘Crisis’: A Narrative”, 5.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Ibid, 5.

²⁴ “Dion coalition would ‘weaken’ Canada: Harper.” *CBC News*, December 3, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/12/03/jean-crisis.html>.

at the height of the crisis.²⁵ The prospect of an unpopular prime minister and the nomination of another prime minister in such a short amount of time without direct electoral input came to compromise the coalition's viability in the eyes of public proponents of electoral democracy, even though leaders of Canadian political parties are never chosen by the public. Consequently, the coalition's leadership became another crucial element in the debate between parliamentary and electoral democracy over the coalition's legitimacy.

It seemed that the governing Conservative party had a slight upper hand against the proposed coalition government based on this question of legitimate leadership. Thus the argument appropriated by the Conservative party to defend the right to govern reflected a vision of electoral democracy that corresponded to this leadership strength. Harper's public address to the media, after the announcement of the Opposition's intentions to defeat the government, directly challenged the parliamentary principle of responsible government. The prime minister's public address announced the following:

The Opposition has every right to defeat the government, but Stéphane Dion does not have the right to take power without an election. Canada's government should be decided by Canadians, not backroom deals. It should be your choice – not theirs. They want to install a government led by a party that received its lowest vote share since Confederation. They want to install a prime minister-prime minister Dion- who was rejected by the votes just six weeks ago.²⁶

The inaccuracies of this statement with regards to the Official Opposition's constitutional ability to "take power" have already been discussed. What is critical about this address is the way it appeals to voters' dissatisfaction and the way it focuses on leadership as the defining factor in the right to govern. By conveying an appealing vision of electoral democracy, based on a philosophy of popular rule, with phrases such as "It should be your choice –not theirs", the prime minister directly challenged MPs latitude to act as representation and the potential for an "unelected" prime minister

²⁵ "Future of coalition, Dion' leadership uncertain." *CBC News*, December 5, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/12/05/coalition-parties.html>

²⁶ Valpy, "The 'Crisis': A Narrative", 11.

to take office. The government's defence of its right to govern consisted of highlighting the weakness of the Opposition's leadership and identifying prime ministerial leadership to be the crucial factor in interpreting the intentions of voters. The most prominent academic to reaffirm this perspective was Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary and former Conservative campaign manager Tom Flanagan. In his article entitled "Only voters have the right to decide on the coalition" for the *Globe and Mail*, Flanagan states that "[t]he most important decision in modern politics is choosing the executive of the national government, and democracy in the 21st century means the voters must have a meaningful voice in that decision...Gross violations of democratic principles would be involved in handing government over to the coalition without getting approval from voters."²⁷ Coalition governments in general came to be seen as undemocratic because they did not correspond with this vision of electoral democracy and leadership.

Russell establishes three "Harper rules" that were formed as a consequence of the prime minister's address, which created doubt over the legitimacy of the coalition government: parliamentary elections result in the election of a prime minister, the prime minister cannot be replaced by the leader of another party without an election, and the coalition government has to campaign as such before being allowed to form government, with its leader having the most seats.²⁸ All of these statements are contradictory to parliamentary principles and academic defenders of parliamentary democracy fervently affirm that a prime minister is not directly elected, rather it is MPs names that are on the ballot, and that the golden rule of responsible government constitutionalizes the Opposition so that it is a viable replacement and monitor of government power. As Professor Jennifer Smith of Dalhousie University states, "[t]he leader of the strongest opposition party is the *Official* Opposition leader, an idea that signifies the legitimacy of opposition

²⁷ Tom Flanagan, "Only voters have the right to decide on the coalition," *Globe & Mail*, January 9, 2009, A13.

²⁸ Russell, "Learning to Live with Minority Parliaments," 141.

to the government of the day and distinguished such opposition from opposition to the state itself.”²⁹ The government’s criticism that the coalition was not presented as an electoral option is also incorrect according parliamentary principles of democracy, as coalition formation practices globally depend on the outcome of elections to determine how to best align parties, as previously discussed.

However, given the concentration of political power in the prime minister’s role and the executive-centered nature of Canada’s parliamentary system, this perspective raises some considerations about the relationship between leadership and representation in Canadian democracy. The Ipsos-reid poll so frequently quoted by academics to demonstrate the Canadian public’s lack of understanding for their political system should also be examined in a new light. While the name of the MP is on the ballot, this is not indicative of a voter’s true intentions. As political scientists Jean Leclair and Jean-Francois Gaudreault-DesBiens claim,

Citizens no longer vote for a particular member of Parliament, they vote for the only members of Parliament whose existence they are aware of: the leaders of the different political parties. Television has made possible a tête-à-tête between the citizen and the head of each party, rendering the local representative’s mediation unnecessary, or, at best, an incidental concern.³⁰

Under the influence of a vigorous media campaign by parties in the previous election to discredit other parties’ leadership, it is entirely probable that voters cast their ballot in support of the MPs in their constituency that were of the same party as their leader of choice. Franks defines Canada’s parliamentary system as executive-centered, a conception of Parliament that has “a concentration of power at the centre...[where p]olicies will be the responsibility of the prime minister and the

²⁹ Jennifer Smith, “Parliamentary Democracy versus Faux Populist Democracy,” in *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*, ed. Lorne Sossin and Peter Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 177.

³⁰ Jean Leclair and Jean-Francois Gaudreault-DesBiens, “Of Representation, Democracy, and Legal Principles”, in *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*, ed. Lorne Sossin and Peter Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 111.

cabinet. There is a strong emphasis on the leadership.”³¹ Given the prime minister’s concentrated powers and the government’s policy making power resulting from their dominance over the introduction of financial legislation, one must question the indirect way that an MP becomes prime minister. In this way, electoral democracy, as the government’s defenders espoused it, raises valid concerns about the way leadership is elected.

Nonetheless, the consequences of the electoral democracy perspective in a minority government situation demonstrate the electoral vision’s weakness. From this perspective it can be concluded that a certain representative function is established in the prime minister at the time of an election. While effectively creating doubt over the proposed coalition government’s viability, this electoral vision of democracy has negative consequences on political systems with a fractured electorate, such as Canada. The notion that during the electoral process, the right to govern is granted to the plurality winner of an election (specifically such a party’s leader) is compatible with majority government situations, but is undemocratic in minority government situations because the majority of the population’s vote is discredited from having contributed to a representative function. In this way, the electoral democracy vision is less defined than Parliamentary democracy in terms of how MPs should exercise their representative function after an election

The actual consequence of the confused cleavage created by the two perspectives on the Canadian public was that the status quo was reinforced as a way of coping with the crisis. Protests and rallies by thousands occurred across the country for and against the coalition. The distraction the coalition’s attempt to form government had caused from managing economic affairs, in addition to a rising question of leadership’s legitimate representation in Canada, caused the public to grow increasingly supportive of the Conservative government. An EKOS poll conducted for the CBC found that 44 per cent of respondents would support the Conservatives if an election were to be held

³¹ C.E.S. Franks, *The Parliament of Canada*, 17.

the next day, which was an increase from the 37.6 per cent of the popular vote the Conservatives had received in the last election.³² The same poll also found that the favoured option to resolve the crisis was to prorogue parliament, a suspension of the parliamentary session and of any decision making on the matter. From these results, we can determine that even though Canadians are increasingly dissatisfied with representation in their political system, confusion as to how to resolve this issue leads to reiteration of what Professor Jonathan Malloy of Carlton University would call the dominant responsible government approach.³³ The dominance of the theory as a recourse to confusion is a result of its nature, steeped in historical convention and precedence.

The crisis was resolved by the prime minister's parliamentary recourse to the governor general to prorogue parliament. The notion that parliamentary systems of government are democratic because the electorate's will strongly influences MPs decision making was upheld. For example, the largely unpopular Dion stepped down in favour of Michael Ignatieff, who declared the seemingly unfavourable coalition null and void by supporting the government's budget when Parliament resumed January 26, 2009. Presumably, even the unelected official of the governor general considered the public desire to be done with the coalition crisis during her long meeting with the prime minister at his request to prorogue Parliament. In essence, the parliamentary system of government is said to be democratic in this instance because of the way the popular will was reflected in the resolution of the crisis. The system of parliamentary government was upheld by employing the mechanisms put in place to manage crisis situations such as this.

In conclusion, the introduction of a new political formation to Canadian federal politics incited a reflection on democratic principles of representation in Canada, notably concerning

³² "Results of CBC News Survey," *CBC News*, December 4, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/pdf/1069-cbc-results-dec4-final.pdf>

³³ Jonathan Malloy, "The 'Responsible Government Approach' and its Effect on Canadian Legislative Studies," *Parliamentary Perspectives*, 5 (November 2002), 2.

leadership. The public's lack of understanding in the parliamentary system of government, heightened by the experience of the last federal election and the fear of economic recession, caused them to be sceptical of a new political formation, the Liberal-NDP led coalition, which was in perfect accord with the parliamentary vision of democracy that corresponds to the Canadian political system of parliamentary government. While circumstances fostered the growth of the critical perspective of electoral democracy and raised valid concerns over the representative function of leadership in the Canadian political system, recourse to the familiar tradition of parliamentary democracy solidified the status quo as the dominant theory, and brushed aside an opportunity for reform.

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