



# WHOSE GOVERNMENT IS THIS, ANYWAY?

Every election is a leap of faith, a test of the proposition that we do actually enjoy the democracy we deserve. Do the men and women we select for high office understand the solemn obligation they owe in return for their fat salaries and even fatter pension plans? Or do they, instead, cleave to the principle of politics as shell game? Is everyone a winner? Or, is there a sucker born every minute?

The second empire of Stephen Harper came to an end in March, just after the Loyal Opposition, in an unprecedented move, declared his government in contempt of Parliament. The laundry list of perceived and real misdeeds committed by the Tory minority regime was long and enervating.

But what set the Liberals, NDP and Bloc on their heels, and into a vote of non-confidence, was the government's determination to withhold documents outlining the cost of its tough-on-crime initiative from Parliament, the so-called "people's house." That, they howled, was an unconscionable display of authoritarianism which could not be tolerated by a society which cherishes democratic meaning and responsibility.

House Speaker Peter Miliken agreed, as he declared "a prima facie breach of privilege" in the government's intractability. "There's no doubt the order to produce documents is not being fully complied with," he said. "This is a serious matter that goes to the House's undoubted role in holding the government to account."

And yet, was it? Did it?

Astonishingly, many Canadians couldn't quite bring themselves to concur. Yes, they knew the prime minister and his cabinet had, for years, waged a stunningly successful campaign against the twin concepts of expertise and collaboration in political culture. Yes, they recognized how this hard-line, right-wing mentality extolled the virtue of certitude in all matters of state; how bias and presumption had supplanted open-mindedness and judgment as qualifications for public office.

But — or so the *vox populi* seemed to suggest — so what? Didn't Harper and his merry pranksters rescue the nation from near-certain collapse during the Great Recession of 2008-2009? Weren't they responsible for keeping shovels in the ground

and men in work boots when the rest of the developed world was falling to pieces on the road to economic perdition? And didn't this matter more than any brittle concern over something as esoteric and conceptual as democracy?

Now that this election is in the books, and another few years loom before someone decides to stage another \$300-million partisan slugfest, we would do ourselves an enormous favour in finally understanding the dangers of our false dichotomies, regardless of who holds the reigns of power.

A democracy whose government preys on the fears of the majority as readily as it embraces its own narrow interests is no democracy at all; it is, by ambition and practice, an elected oligarchy. And over the years, Canada has come closer to that which its traditions and civic sensibilities once utterly despised: a nation ruled by smug, self-satisfied cohorts whose coarse manipulation of facts and rational argument undermines intelligent debate and resists effective political opposition.

This is not essentially a Conservative evil, or a Liberal one. If anything, it's a social ill, bred of our dislocation from, and disenchantment with, a system we no longer trust to reflect our interests. And so we decide we can have a transparent, representative government, or we can have one that "gets things done" by whatever means necessary. But we can't have both.

In fact, a system is only as good as its inputs, and a democracy, so often born in fury and hope, withers and dies when its citizens turn their backs on it.

The conceit that the previous government, alone, saved us from economic ruin ignores the fact that the instruments at its disposal were developed by a generation of public officials, from all points on the ideological spectrum, working in concert and in the best interests of all Canadians.

It was our very democracy that made us economically competitive — made us winners in a world of losers — just when we needed it. In this case, we passed the test of the proposition that we do actually enjoy the democracy we deserve.

Will we again? | ABM

***A democracy, so often born in fury and hope, withers and dies when its citizens turn their backs on it.***



Illustration: Iain Keith Murray

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: [dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com](mailto:dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com)