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OttawaWatch 186: Will they or won't they?

By Lloyd Mackey

Interestingly, a few months later, the combined opposition, tried to collaborate to defeat the government's budget. It was described in media as a "parliamentary crisis" Some media types – those not party to attempts to "hate" the government of the day into oblivion – described it as a "coup-alition"

Prime Minister Harper headed off the "coup" by proroguing parliament for a few weeks until, in the government's view, "cooler heads could prevail." The fact that the separatist Bloc Quebecois would, in effect, be a part of this collaboration was an arrow in the government's quiver, when Harper needed to convince the governor-general not to accept the opposition offer to govern.

Analysis on the "coup-alition" is contained in OttawaWatch 200, written on December 2, 2008.

Will they, that is, call an election?

Of course, the vote date is already set. For the first time in Canadian history, the timing of the federal election has been determined. It is set by legislation for on or close to October 19, 2009.

The last federal vote was January 23, 2006. The intention of the 2009 date was to take it as close to possible to a four-year term, without repeating, into the future, more winter elections.

So, why are we talking, now, about an election call for October, 2008, coming as early as September 2?

It all started with the prime minister suggesting that the opposition leader "fish or cut bait." His comment was widely interpreted as challenging the Liberals to pull the plug on the government (fish) or keep supporting government legislation by sitting out house votes (cut bait).

From this viewpoint, the generally-accepted punditry has it backwards. Fishing, I submit, means to keep parliament going; to keep the government's feet to the fire, to produce good legislation.

Collaboration, in other words.

Now, as OttawaWatch readers are regularly reminded, your humble scribe is the author of a book entitled *Stephen Harper: The Case for Collaborative Governance*.

In its closing chapter, the book makes the case for principled collaborative governance in a minority parliament.

It does not, however, have anything to say about opposing government collaboratively. Such opposition means being strongly critical of whatever is being proposed, but stopping short of felling the government.

To that end, most of the committees have functioned fairly well, as has, to a lesser extent, the Liberal-dominated Senate.

Ironically, a different kind of collaboration appears to have been in play in some Commons committees – notably the one dealing with ethics. And, in my modest view, that is the collaboration causing the prime minister to ponder the “dysfunction” of Parliament.

And I would suggest, gently, that if Stephen Harper and Stephane Dion can deal collaboratively with that dysfunction, we could avoid an election this fall.

Dion could act collaboratively by calling off the hounds who form what would appear to be a significant presence on this issue – the Liberal MPs on the ethics committee.

The issue relates to the “in and out” scheme. That road map reads something like this: Some Liberal MPs, along with some Elections Canada officials and some journalists, seem quite determined to plant, in the public mind, the idea that Conservatives overspent their election limits during the 2006 elections. The implication is that the moving of money in and out of various local candidate accounts may have constituted criminal activity.

It is legally wise, at this point, to note that none of these allegations have been proven in court.

And that is, in the Conservative view, precisely the point. The Tories have challenged Election Canada’s rulings in this matter to the Federal Court of Canada. There, they believe, the traditional rules of evidence will provide clarification for all parties on how to deal with election spending rules – especially in the light of the political requirements of contemporary local, regional and national advertising campaigns.

So, it can be argued, in the cold hard light of day, that clarification is needed. And, to be fair to Elections Canada, there are some indications that the agency is trying to communicate more clearly with the parties than it has previously.

But that does not resolve the past. The resolution lies with the federal court.

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So, how can Dion act collaboratively to avoid an election?

That is something that he will have to work out with Harper. But my suggestion is that the opposition leader might try getting the Liberals out of the demonizing business on things that belong more properly before the courts. Then, he could continue exactly what he has been doing – seeing that his party thoroughly critiques legislation that might, in Liberal eyes, be good but not necessarily best. Get us all through to October 19, 2009.

And what risks would Dion take by being collaborative?

Well, he might find that the Conservatives turn out looking pretty good – so good, in fact, that in another 18 months Harper might achieve one of his original stated goals. That would be to get all those various kinds of small-c conservatives pulling one way, including those who were parked with the Liberals during the Chretien years. Taking this parliament to its natural end can give the Tories enough time to demonstrate their thesis that moderate conservatism in incremental doses – including listening carefully to faith-based conservatives – will work to the common good

But wouldn't Dion be destroying his own chances of being a Liberal prime minister? Well, yes, but he has some other choices. If, once the Conservatives have reached their full governance potential, the presently-fragmented centre-left might need someone to pull them together. That could be Dion's legacy.

So the meetings between Harper and the other three party leaders this week are pretty crucial.

It is not yet a done deal that there is to be an election this fall. And, from this perspective, that is a good thing.

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Here is one more suggestion for Harper.

Should he win Dion's collaboration, he might seriously consider appointing some senators, rather than leaving empty the 20 plus upper house seats that will be vacant by year end.

Ideally, the candidates for such appointments would be people of an age and experience level that could contribute to advancing permanent senate reform. And they could, themselves, enhance that reform by being prepared or required to vacate their seats in time for the first senate election, hopefully occurring on October 19, 2013.

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A housekeeping item: In listing a number of people, last week, who might do, for Canadian faith/political interfacing, what Rick Warren of Saddleback Church did recently

on CNN with Barack Obama and John McCain, I neglected one possibly-obvious name – that of Lorna Dueck of *ListenUp*.

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