



The Water Cooler

by Carl Rosenberg

The Fruits of Contempt

The election outcome is enough to make me think cynically, “Crime pays,” as it returned a parliament with a Conservative majority, in spite of “The Harper Government’s” many abuses of power. I’m struck by the sheer diversity of misdeeds, ranging from the prorogation of parliament (twice in a year) to fend off a non-confidence vote and opposition inquiries, to abuses both financial (the massive payout, accompanied by a gag order, to disgraced “Integrity Commissioner” Christiane Ouimet) and procedural. The latter includes acts verging on forgery: changing the meaning of an already-signed document (Bev Oda’s “not”), and, in a parliamentary report, misattributing a statement by Auditor-General Sheila Fraser, which she made regarding spending under previous Liberal governments, to make it appear as if she were applauding the Conservatives for prudent spending at the G8-G20 summits. It’s an overall record unparalleled in modern Canadian history apart from the era of Maurice Duplessis in Quebec.

The election was precipitated not just by the defeat of the Conservative budget, but also by the historic ruling of contempt of parliament on the part of House Speaker Peter Milliken, supported by a majority of MPs. Even though this was a first not only in Canadian history, but in any Commonwealth country, Harper dismissed it as a partisan manoeuvre—“you win some, you lose some”—thereby proving the point of the ruling holding the government in contempt.

This would have been the subject of intense discussion if the mainstream media had much interest in Canadian democratic or parliamentary traditions, but once the election campaign was underway, Harper easily managed to shift the debate with his demagogic warnings of a hypothetical opposition coalition. Harper ran his usual “bubble” campaign—limiting questions from reporters to five a day, and using strong-arm tactics to keep anyone but staunch supporters at a distance. As the *Toronto Star* (April 7) commented, “This isn’t a typical bubble protecting a politician. It’s an armour-plated cocoon.”

One argument of Harper’s defenders is that,

whatever his abuses, at least he takes care of us, as it were, supposedly having managed the economy skillfully through a global recession. This was argued in *The Globe & Mail’s* editorial endorsement of the Conservatives (“Facing up to our challenges,” April 28). The *Globe* editors conceded that Harper has been guilty of “a disrespect for Parliament, the abuse of prorogation, repeated attempts (including during this campaign) to stanch debate and free expression.” But still they lauded him for demonstrating “strength of character” (sic) and “a desire to reform,” and for his “successful stewardship of the economy.”

Let’s leave aside the fact that, in spite of Conservative spin, Canada seemed to be spared the worst effects of the recession because of financial

regulations established by previous Liberal governments. What I find telling is the argument itself: endorsing Harper in spite of his violations of democratic procedures because of his supposed managerial qualities, even extolling him for having the “bullheadedness ... and the discipline this country needs.”

The logic is similar to a remark made by Chicago’s thuggish mayor

Richard Daley. When one

of his opponents accused him of being a feudal lord, Daley replied with insouciance: “He said I was a feudal lord—he didn’t say I was a *bad* feudal lord.”

Globe writer John Ibbitson, writing in a similar vein after the election, stated approvingly that a plurality of voters “gave Mr. Harper high marks ... and discounted any howls about Parliament being prorogued or reporters not being able to ask questions.” Apparently such things as democratic procedures, openness to questioning and criticism, and accountability (which Harper campaigned on in 2006) are ridiculous distractions from making the trains run on time.

The *Globe* has published commendable exposes of Harper’s abuses (such as Paul Koring’s articles and Lawrence Martin’s columns). It is sad that it would nevertheless endorse the most reactionary and authoritarian government in modern Canadian history, at a time when people are protesting worldwide—especially in the Middle East—against dictatorships and regimes of occupation, and paying for it with their lives.

Critiques of “Harperism”

Some commentators, even such strong critics of Harper as Lawrence Martin, have speculated

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Geoff Olson, *Vancouver Courier*, April 13.

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(TOP) Outlook readers shmooze, Gyda Chud. (MIDDLE L. TO R.) Members of the International Brotherhood of Lasagna Workers Local 1 (Adam, Saul, Harold, and Josh Berson, Tamara Mackenzie, David Berson). (BOTTOM L. TO R.) Micheal Vonn, Carl Rosenberg, Martha Roth, Stephen Aberle. Photos: Donna Becker

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plausibly that with a parliamentary majority he might not be quite so dictatorial. If this is the case, it will be because with the overwhelming power of a majority, Harper won't need to sabotage parliamentary committees (which will be dominated by Conservative MPs) or prorogue parliament to avoid non-confidence votes. But the projection itself seems uncertain, given

Harper's unprecedented drive for top-down control. Within the Conservatives' omnibus "tough-on-crime" bill, there are provisions for massive internet surveillance—in effect, the contemporary equivalent of wire-tapping—without a court order.

We will need to be vigilant, especially since the sordid history to date of "the Harper Government" is being swept under the rug by commentators such as Mr. Ibbitson. As an antidote, here are three powerful critiques

(available online) of "Harperism": Murray Dobbin, "Stephen Harper's Hitlist: Power, process and the assault on democracy" (published by the Council of Canadians), Erna Paris, "The New Solitudes" (*The Walrus*, April 13), and Lawrence Martin, "The descent of democracy: A country under one man's thumb" (ipolitics.ca, April 27). (Also worth reading is Martin's book *Harperland: The Politics of Control*.) We need these works now more than ever. ♦