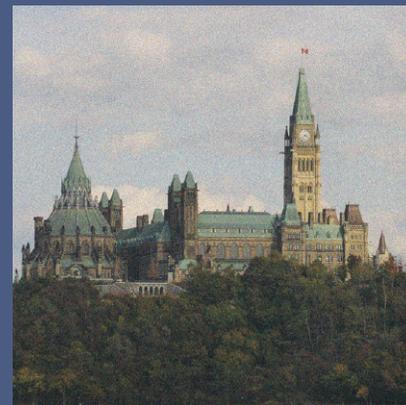


# THE POTENTIAL IN A MINORITY GOVERNMENT

Martha Hall Findlay

One of the reasons minority governments are so problematic, writes Liberal MP Martha Hall Findlay, is that “we just don’t have much experience with minorities.” But as long as the Bloc is a major player in a four-party House, “we are going to have minorities for the foreseeable future.” In other words, it’s the new normal. Get used to it. And deal with it. Her challenge to the Canadian political leadership is to “take the opportunity afforded by minority government to spread responsibility for some, but necessary, decisions.”



« Nous avons tout simplement peu d’expérience des gouvernements minoritaires », affirme la députée libérale Martha Hall Findlay pour expliquer qu’ils posent tant de problèmes. Et tant que le Bloc québécois restera un acteur clé à la Chambre des communes, « nous continuerons d’avoir des gouvernements minoritaires dans un avenir prévisible ». Bref, ils constituent aujourd’hui la « nouvelle norme ». Il faudra donc s’y habituer et apprendre à gérer la situation. Pour ce faire, la députée propose de « saisir l’occasion offerte par les gouvernements minoritaires pour élargir la responsabilité de certaines décisions indispensables ».

**W**e hear, over and over, how problematic minority governments are in Canada. “Nothing gets done.” “It’s politically unstable.” “The government can’t get any legislation through.” “The opposition only opposes.” “It’s all politics all of the time.”

My purpose here is to suggest that our minority government is, in fact, a golden opportunity to do just the opposite — to get some fundamental things done.

Everyone agrees that Canadians are increasingly disenchanted by government. Commentators of all political stripes said as much (*Policy Options*, September 2010). We’d all be hard-pressed to find anybody — it doesn’t matter whether it’s at a Tim Hortons or a Starbucks — who will tell you they either like or respect what they see. As far as they see, all we do is huff and puff and attack each other — to the neglect of some of the important issues facing the country. And that’s because it’s mostly true. We, the collective that makes up the Canadian government, haven’t accomplished a whole lot in recent years, and we’ve all looked rather awful in the process.

Over the last four years we’ve seen bills proposed, on both sides of the House, for political gain rather than to move substantive policies forward. The easy wedge issues dominate the list — often, specifically because they are the ones that will highlight the partisan divides — the gun registry, crime and punishment, abortion... It’s a “pure politics” legislative agenda that too often avoids the tougher yet fundamental economic and social challenges we face.

There are a couple of reasons for this. One, we just don’t have much experience with minorities. Canada has been

governed almost entirely by one majority government or another, basically alternating between Liberals and Conservatives. We don’t have much experience with the idea, or the mechanisms, of compromise because you don’t need to in a majority. The other result of a history of majorities, as Tom Flanagan has pointed out, is a political culture that sees minority governments as aberrations. A minority government is seen only as a transition, a time merely to plot, strategize and behave in a way that will ensure a majority election at the soonest opportunity. Everyone is far more concerned with “being” government — either staying there, or getting there — than with actually “governing.”

There is concern, however, that thanks to the strength of the Bloc Québécois, we will have minority governments for the foreseeable future.

Some say the only answer is another majority. Well, if that isn’t likely to happen anytime soon, just hoping isn’t going to help much. And these days, many people are leery of a having majority just to be able to get things done more easily, when we’re not comfortable with what those “things” might be.

Others recommend changes to the process. I support, for example, Michael Chong’s efforts to amend Question Period — indeed, I am proud to say that I am one of his seconders for his motion. But although that might help decorum and make Parliament less offputting, it won’t change the underlying problem of getting significant legislation done.

Some say that the opposition should form a coalition, thus corraling a majority of the seats in the House. People point out that, indeed, the only other time that we had three minority

governments in a row — from 1963 to 1968 — a great deal was accomplished through cooperation between the Liberal government under Lester B. Pearson and the NDP under Tommy Douglas: universal health care, student loans, our refusal to send troops to Vietnam, the Canada Pension Plan, the unification of the Canadian Armed Forces, our own Canadian flag, royal commissions on the status of women and on bilingualism and biculturalism, the Auto Pact and arguably the world's first "race-free" immigration system, which eliminated criteria based on race or ethnicity in favour of a points system. (Whew!) It wasn't a formal coalition, but it allowed the Liberals to govern like a majority government. The key was the personal leadership shown by both Pearson and Douglas, both well-respected parliamentarians who recognized the benefits of compromise. It was also possible because this "power sharing" (to use Tom Flanagan's term) was between the government and the NDP, a party never seen as being able to form government on its own. The NDP wasn't in a position to "compete" with the governing Liberals, the way the Liberals and Conservatives do with each other; therefore compromise wasn't threatening. In any case, many point to this success as reason to "do it again."

But that was then, this is now. The numbers are different, thanks in large measure, of course, to the strength of the Bloc Québécois. Even if the Liberals and the NDP were to cooperate, informally or formally through a coalition, they wouldn't have enough numbers on their own. Also, the Liberals are not in government this time, which raises (correctly or not) the "legitimacy" argument because a Liberal-NDP coalition would leave out the biggest single party. Significantly, there are now substantial numbers of Liberals and Conservatives (particularly the former Progressive Conservatives) who hold similar views and support "centrist" policies that are economically pragmatic and fiscally prudent, while also socially progressive. Many "centrist" Liberals would now object to getting too cozy with the current NDP.

So what do we do? Why not see the glass as half full? Rather than being an impediment to legislative progress, the current minority government is, in my view, an opportunity. This is not based on some naive view that the current political leadership will see the light and, out of a sudden sense of goodwill and public service, seek compromise. I wouldn't hold my breath for that. No, I see an opportunity based on a form of domestic realpolitik, because there are a number of issues on which, in 2010, unlike in the 1960s, a significant number of Liberals and a significant number of Conservatives agree — or at least come fairly close — and because the very fact of a minority government can allow the participants to "spread the blame" for some tough decisions.

I'm not advocating "power sharing," as described by Tom Flanagan, partly because that term implies each party giving something up to the other. I'm not at all sure that's necessary. We're not going to get away from the underlying reality of partisan politics. Each party will continue to compete with the other to form the next government, and neither will willingly give up possible gain or expose themselves to attack. But here's the opportunity: if the two main competitors (or, even better, all parties) agree on something and move it forward, where is the political damage? Neither party risks the negative criticisms from the other if they've moved it forward together. There's even political gain to be had, as each party can take credit for its own participation, for its own input in reaching compromise. Consider the often successful tactic of shunting tough issues to the courts — it can be very helpful to be able to say, "It's not our fault, this was the court's decision." Think of compromise between the major parties as a similar opportunity — no one can be singled out for blame if a decision isn't universally accepted. "It's not our fault — they agreed to do it too."

Best of all, we now know that this domestic realpolitik approach can work, with the recent amendments to the *Immigration and Refugee Protection*

*Act*. The changes are less dramatic than what the government wanted, more so than what some Liberals and NDPers wanted. But progress was made without negative partisan backlash. Indeed, the participants earned respect for being able to compromise. Lo and behold, we achieved significant legislative progress in a minority government without sacrificing partisan advantage.

Of course, there are issues we will not agree on: Crime, and punishment vs. prevention. Abortion. An elected Senate. Climate change. There are, however, a number of issues that are crying out for action, where nothing has been done out of fear of partisan attack but where some compromise is and should be possible precisely because we're in a minority government. Aboriginal issues. Copyright. Pensions and retirement issues. Some aspects of federal-provincial relations. Arctic sovereignty. Trade. What to do next in Afghanistan...These offer real opportunities for us to find some common ground on which to take action.

My challenge to the current Canadian political leadership is to take the opportunity afforded by minority government to spread responsibility for some of those tough but necessary decisions. Success will require some shared values and principles, some humility and some courage. But based on the many colleagues I have come to know and respect, in all parties, I know that those qualities are out there.

The people who vote for us vest in us, collectively, a great responsibility — to govern, to enact policies and make decisions to take the country forward to improve the lives of Canadians. You've never heard a politician say, when asked why s/he got into politics, "I wanted to maintain the status quo" or "I only wanted power." Invariably, the answer is along the lines of "I wanted to make a difference, a positive difference for Canadians." Well then, colleagues, let's get at it.

*Martha Hall Findlay is the Liberal MP from the Toronto riding of Willowdale. She is a graduate of University of Toronto and Osgoode Hall.*