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Stephen Harper's sudden stumble prompts the opposition to unite and could cause a change of government, a constitutional crisis—or both

Illustration by David Simonds



THERE are no tanks in the streets or protesters occupying the airport, but Canada is in the midst of political turmoil the like of which this normally placid country has rarely seen. Only seven weeks ago Stephen Harper, the prime minister, won a second term for his Conservative government, but once again without winning a parliamentary majority. Now the three disparate opposition parties—the centrist Liberals, the socialist New Democrats (NDP) and the separatist Bloc Québécois—have ganged up in order to oust the Conservatives and replace them with a centre-left coalition. That left Mr Harper scrabbling for survival. As *The Economist* went to press, he was expected to ask Michaëlle Jean, who as governor-general acts as Canada's head of state, to suspend Parliament for a month—though he might instead seek its dissolution and a fresh election.

Since the opposition parties hold a combined 163 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, if they stick together they would easily win a confidence vote against the government (which holds 143 seats) if this went ahead as scheduled on December 8th. Their alliance is an unlikely one. Stéphane Dion, the Liberal leader, is an academic from Quebec who came into politics a decade ago expressly to oppose the French-speaking province's separatists, represented by Gilles Duceppe and his Bloc Québécois. Jack Layton, the NDP leader, has spent his career savaging previous Liberal governments.

Yet on December 1st the three leaders wrote to the governor-general offering to form a Liberal-NDP coalition government. The Bloc will not join in but its 49 MPs will back it for the next 18 months. The letter prompted Ms Jean, a former refugee from Haiti, to cut short a trip to Europe to rush back to Ottawa. Under the constitution, it is the governor-general's prerogative to invite a party leader to form a government, with or without an election.

This sudden decision to stage a political coup was prompted by a government economic statement on November 27th. The ostensible reason for opposition outrage was that Jim Flaherty, the finance minister, offered no new measures to stimulate the economy. But that smacks of a pretext: despite alarmist headlines, for now the economy remains in relatively good shape, growing at an annual rate of 1.3% in the third quarter of 2008. Unemployment is still low. Even the gloomiest forecasters so far see only a modest contraction in 2009. The government has promised help for Ontario's car industry. Mr Flaherty insisted that previously announced measures, including tax cuts, would suffice until the budget due on January 27th.

What really provoked the opposition parties was that, having said there was no need for extraordinary measures, Mr Flaherty threw in some highly partisan ones: a big cut in public funding for political parties (which provides 60% of opposition revenues but less than 40% for the Conservatives); a ban on strikes by public-service unions; and making it harder for women civil servants to complain if they are not paid the same as their male colleagues.

A joke doing the rounds in Ottawa holds that Mr Harper, credited with having united two feuding right-of-centre parties to form the Conservatives in 2003, has now done what was thought impossible and united the left too. Inserting the cuts in political financing into the financial update was an "appallingly dumb decision", says Roger Gibbins of the Canada West Foundation, an Alberta-based think-tank. The government quickly dropped the measures on political funding and the right to strike. But it was too late to stop the opposition's plans to seize power.

The opposition's putative coalition is beset with flaws. Its problems start with its leader. Mr Dion piloted the Liberals to their worst-ever showing in the election. He is due to be replaced as Liberal leader at a party convention in May. Then there is policy, which has required some difficult compromises. Mr Dion has agreed to drop his unpopular carbon tax (he now backs a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions). Mr Layton has dropped his previous opposition to cuts in corporate taxes. A further awkwardness concerns reliance on the votes of the Bloc, whose *raison d'être* is the break-up of Canada.

All this means that Mr Harper may yet manage to cling to power. He has defiantly raised the political temperature. He has accused the Liberals of selling out the country to separatists (in fact, in his first term he sometimes relied on separatist votes and when in opposition the Conservatives similarly offered to replace a Liberal minority government with help from the Bloc and the NDP). The Conservatives are repeating that message in a blitz of radio and television advertising, as well as planning rallies across the country. He has vowed to "use all legal means to resist this undemocratic seizure of power".

Nevertheless, the prime minister is damaged. Some pundits have suggested that the Conservative government will survive only if Mr Harper steps down. A control freak who does not allow ministers to speak publicly without his approval, he can hardly blame others for his misfortune. Although there is no open revolt in Conservative ranks, several ministers pointedly failed to applaud the prime minister in the House of Commons this week.

But Mr Harper shows no sign of contrition. "The highest principle of Canadian democracy is that you get your mandate from the Canadian people," Mr Harper told the House of Commons. Suspending Parliament for a month would buy time—and might cool the opposition's ardour for unity. But it might also allow the Liberals to bring forward their leadership vote and replace the lacklustre Mr Dion. And it was not certain that Ms Jean would agree to suspend Parliament to enable Mr Harper to dodge the confidence vote.

Whatever happens, this week's events may change Canadian politics for ever. Only the Liberals or Conservatives have governed in Ottawa since 1926, but Canada now has four significant parties (a fifth, the Greens, won nearly 7% of the vote but no seats). Coalition politics may be inevitable. Are Canadians ready for it? An opinion poll this week by Angus Reid Strategies found that 35% of respondents wanted the Conservatives to stay in power, and 40% favoured change. Only 32% wanted a fresh election, which would be the fourth in less than five years. Even so, Canadians have little idea who might be governing them after Christmas.