

The Economist

Canada's Parliament returns

Seal of approval

Bereft of controversy, lawmakers chew seal meat and sing a sexist anthem

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WHEN Canada's prime minister, Stephen Harper, prorogued Parliament in December for more than two months, to avoid some bothersome debates, he said this was so his minority Conservative government could "recalibrate" its policies. Now that the recession was over, he said, the emphasis needed to shift towards budgetary control. However, as the new session began on March 3rd, the throne speech outlining the legislative programme was notable for its dearth of new ideas. Likewise the rather dull budget speech the next day.

The Liberals, the main opposition, were so stumped for something to quibble with in the budget that they decided not to vote it down, which at least spares Canadians a third general election in just over four years. So, with little of substance to joust over, lawmakers have been turning their attention to some less urgent matters. In response to a proposal by a Liberal senator, the parliamentary canteen served seal meat for the first time on March 10th. The idea is to show solidarity with hunters, on Canada's Atlantic and Arctic coasts, who are enraged at the European Union's recent ban on imports of seal products. Last year Canada's governor-general, Michaëlle Jean, caused a stir by eating raw seal meat on a visit to the Arctic. The lawmakers enjoyed theirs cooked, in a port sauce.



He's a lumberjack and he's OK...

Mr Harper's own attempt to lighten the greyness of parliamentary life was a proposal to rewrite the national anthem, "O Canada", replacing a male-chauvinist phrase, "thy sons command", with a gender-neutral but somewhat archaic previous wording, "dost in us command". The idea was put to him by Senator Nancy Ruth, the Conservatives' only openly gay parliamentarian. Alas, an immediate and overwhelmingly negative reaction forced the prime minister to backtrack just 48 hours later.

Still, the debate about the suitability of "O Canada" for the modern age is bound to continue, especially if lawmakers fail to find anything more important to argue about. Fortunately, a catchy, impeccably progressive Canadian anthem fit for the 21st century has already been written (albeit by Brits): Monty Python's "Lumberjack Song", which celebrates the lifestyle choices of a cross-dressing, gender-liberated woodcutter from British Columbia who wishes he'd been a girlie, just like his dear Mama.

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