

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Strategists panel

Another arrow in the opposition's 'hubris quiver'

Is prorogation a silver bullet? No, political insiders say, but it can be an effective weapon for Stephen Harper's rivals

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Greg Lyle (former chief of staff for Manitoba premier Gary Filmon, and managing director of the [Innovative Research Group](#)): Can the opposition make Canadians care about prorogation? Arguably Canadians already do care. But is prorogation the most important issue for the opposition? I think not.

Two polls that say Canadians are aware of prorogation and a majority don't like it. Other polls have suggested the Conservative numbers are slipping in part due to negative reaction to the prorogation announcement. But the Conservatives don't need 50 per cent. They only need 40 per cent in the right places. The opposition doesn't need issues that have the government off side with half the public. They need issues that have the government offside with 70 per cent of the likely voters.

For Tory opponents, prorogation is further proof of Tory arrogance and lack of accountability. Given the Liberal vote has been running below their brand loyalty (not even all the people who see themselves as Liberals have been willing to vote Liberal) prorogation gives the Liberals an issue they can use to rally their base.

“ For Jack and Jill Everyday, the Prime Minister's incremental assaults on our democratic traditions can't compete with daily worries like paying down credit cards and finding affordable child care.”— Liberal strategist Scott Reid

However, for swing voters and non-voters who might be mobilized to vote for the opposition and against the Tories, prorogation is an “inside the beltway” issue. The fact that prorogation is being used to avoid accountability for how Afghan prisoners were treated is not going to be a major topic of conversation in coffee shops like the Ruby restaurant in *Corner Gas*. And it is in those conversations that a majority government will be won or lost.

While the opposition and punditry are talking about prorogation and Afghans, the government is moving to steal a march on its opponents by talking about the next big thing in politics – where the country goes now that we have weathered the financial crisis. This involves both the country's economic strategy and its fiscal strategy.

When people at the Ruby talk about current events and politics, they are talking about economic uncertainty and what it means in terms of questions like jobs and retirement savings, not prorogation. Federal and provincial deficits and the decisions they force on government will be the major factor driving political news for the next two or three years.

The government, through its consultation exercise, is now trying to shift channels to the next budget and what it says about the economy and the deficit. If the government succeeds in defining that debate, they are well on their way to winning the next election. If the opposition fails to challenge the government in framing the issue because they are running after prorogation, the opposition will only have itself to blame as Stephen Harper celebrates his majority win.

Scott Reid (former communications director for Paul Martin, and principal with the speechwriting company [Feschuk-Reid](#)): Stephen Harper has already overreached on the issue of prorogation. Michael Ignatieff would be well counselled to not do likewise.

Clearly, fresh public opinion data from EKOS suggests the Prime Minister's dismissal of the democratic inconvenience known as Parliament is [no hit with Canadians](#). Perhaps that will serve as a caution to a leader who routinely justifies his actions on the basis of whether or not swing voters care – as opposed to that lonely old standard known as right and wrong.

However, the Liberals make a mistake if they seek to overly leverage partisan advantage from the Conservative misstep. Do people think Mr. Harper is taking too much for granted? Absolutely. But for Jack and Jill Everyday, the Prime Minister's incremental assaults on our democratic traditions can't compete with daily worries like paying down credit cards and finding affordable child care.

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The question for Liberals is not whether Mr. Harper is wrong – or whether Canadians are about to rise in open revolution. He is and they're not. The question is whether they can do anything about it. And the answer is they can do a great deal – by reversing this trend when returned to government. It would be a miscalculation, however, to see this issue as a pathway to power.

By all means, take a clear stand and defend the privileges of Parliament. Condemn Mr. Harper's cynicism and commit to reforms you would implement if elected. But if it's getting elected that interests you most, the Liberal Party would be far better served to focus their efforts where they have been so lacking in recent months: connecting with Canada's broad middle class on the issues that worry them most.

That means giving voice to concerns the Harper government ignores and presenting a cogent alternative. Limping out of this recession, Canada's middle class feels more distressed about their prospects than at any time in the post-war era. Families feel the loss in their net worth. They fear for their ability to pay for childcare, for their children's education and for the costs of their aging parents. They don't believe a secure retirement is easily within reach and they certainly don't hear anyone in this prorogued Parliament with a plan to make things any better in the near future.

Take that fight to Stephen Harper. Make him answer for his refusal to meet the needs of the middle class. Make him confirm his priorities lie elsewhere. And then you can worry less about his refusal to respect Parliament because you'll be taking steps toward electing a future Parliament in which he plays no part.

Leslie Campbell (former chief of staff for Audrey McLaughlin, and senior associate at the [National Democratic Institute](#)): Unlike the United States with its elaborate system of checks and balances and multiple entry points for influencing public policy, Canada has few mechanisms for public input. While periodic elections may represent the ultimate judgment of a government's

worthiness, between elections it is Canada's Parliament – through constituent input to MPs, committee hearings and parliamentary debate – that provides the accountability and transparency that is the hallmark of a democracy. If the opposition is to gain serious traction, it must find a way to explain the importance of Parliament while avoiding fake outrage and histrionics. In the end, it is hubris that causes governments to fall and the surprise suspension of Parliament should be positioned as an act of arrogance and entitlement.

This is my list of dos and don'ts for generating and sustaining public concern about a silent parliament:

DO

Persist. Like many opposition issues, the prorogation intrigue may soon subside and political life will go on. That would be unfortunate.

The opposition has two months to milk this. As much as the Prime Minister may wish to change the subject, the empty parliamentary chamber will serve as a daily reminder that the only national elected body in Canada is no longer meeting. It is up to the opposition to keep the flame burning.

Invoke accountability. Accountability is the key to democracy.

Arbitrarily suspending the work of the central democratic body in the country should not subject to the Prime Minister's whims but should be subject to consultation with all parties. The opposition should remind the public that the government appears to be avoiding accountability.

Organize shadow committee meetings. Given the government decided to suspend the work of the House unilaterally, the opposition should continue some of Parliament's work on its own. Committee meetings could be held on Afghanistan-related issues, climate change or on the economy. If the meetings are managed well and excess partisanship is avoided, they could be a credible forum for debate.

Hold regular press conferences. Question Period is the opposition's best venue, but there is nothing prohibiting daily opposition press briefings. Media coverage may wane over time, but reporters may find the opposition interventions a welcome break from a steady diet of government news releases and photo-ops.

DON'T

Call the parliamentary break a "vacation." Or accuse the government of not working. It's not a vacation for the government (or MPs for that matter) and insinuating that it reflects negatively on all involved. Besides, Stephen Harper and his ministers will look like they are working whereas the opposition MPs will be the ones who seem to be on vacation.

Act "holier than thou." All governments play procedural games and it has already been noted that previous Liberal governments have prorogued for dubious reasons. A former boss, Manitoba government house leader Jay Cowan, was fond of saying that "House time is opposition time," noting that long legislative sessions play to opposition strengths, not the government's agenda.

Whine. Most Canadians find parliamentary shenanigans off-putting at the best of times. Moaning about how unfair the government is won't create a groundswell of sympathy for the opposition. Be constructive. Demonstrate why Parliament matters.

Proroguing Parliament will not, on its own, become an issue that any party rides to victory, but managed wisely it is yet another arrow in the hubris quiver.

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