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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

February 26, 2010

It's gonna get ugly as bell rings on prorogation

Special to The Globe and Mail

Expect petty partisan jabs, cheap political shots and a laser-like focus on Prime Minister Stephen Harper's character and his zealous drive to slash government spending when the House gets back to regular business

What do you expect to see on the floor of the House of Commons when Parliament resumes after its forced Olympic holiday? Political insiders weigh in.

Leslie Campbell (former chief of staff for Audrey McLaughlin, and senior associate at the National Democratic Institute [<http://www.ndi.org>]): Unfortunately, I think we're about to see more of the same petty partisanship, small mindedness and over-the-top histrionics when Parliament resumes. Prorogation and the Olympics gave no definitive political advantage to government or opposition. Polls remain deadlocked within the margin of error and neither Prime Minister Stephen Harper nor Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff seem ready to adopt a statesman-like role.

As is their wont, the New Democrats under Jack Layton is less prone to the gamesmanship and will continue to propose thoughtful policy alternatives. Absent a willingness to tackle true party modernization, though, the NDP glass ceiling of 18 to 20 per cent will be hard to break through.

While the pride generated via the Vancouver Olympics has caused many citizens to feel "more Canadian than ever before," as one late night reveller was recently quoted, the polarization in Canadian politics seems more American than ever.

Partisanship has reached new highs in Washington as evidenced by a rash of announced retirements by politicians considered moderates or centrists within their own parties. The latest of the retirees, Indiana Senator Evan Bayh, cited a "pervasive campaign atmosphere," hyper-partisanship and lack of civility as reasons for voluntarily stepping away from the normally coveted post.

But Washington isn't the only place awash in vitriol. Canada certainly has a pervasive campaign atmosphere with campaign-style war-rooms spitting out duelling press releases on the most mundane of issues. This week, attendance or non-attendance at the Olympics became an issue with PMO-generated talking points accusing the NDP of playing politics instead of supporting Canadian athletes in Vancouver. Michael Ignatieff was accused of flip-flopping when he decided to attend the Vancouver extravaganza. What any of this has to do with governing is unclear.

The sparring over the Olympics paled next to the fracas at Montreal's Rights and Democracy organization. The government's proposed appointment of Gerard Latulippe, a former MNA and minister under Robert Bourassa, received exceptional scrutiny because of the overheated politics around the Conservatives' board appointments to the independent agency. Mr. Latulippe, also a former candidate for the Canadian Alliance in Quebec City, has had a long and successful international career as the provincial representative in Brussels and Mexico City, a development worker in Africa, and then a democracy adviser in Morocco, Mauritania, Iraq, Jordan and Haiti.

Ironically, the Bloc and Liberal opposition, while simultaneously decrying the government's continued partisanship, have rejected Mr. Latulippe's appointment on almost purely political grounds. Noting that he "was co-chair for the [Canadian Alliance] in the 2000 election campaign" and a "key advisor and leadership campaign chair for Quebec for Stockwell Day," Mr. Ignatieff concludes in a letter to Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon that, Mr. Latulippe's "stated views and political career path," raise questions about "his capacity to be a principled president for Rights & Democracy."

While I don't share Mr. Latulippe's political orientation, I don't believe that stated political views and career path are reasons to question a person's capacity to act in a principled manner. Are political beliefs a proxy for integrity? For sincerity? For decency? Of course not. Is Mr. Ignatieff proposing that Liberals are, by definition, principled, while Conservatives are not? That's hogwash and should not be a part of our political discourse.

Perhaps my pessimism is misplaced. Mr. Ignatieff seems to have found some footing and has been more effective of late. NDP foreign critic Paul Dewar and his Liberal counterpart Bob Rae have avoided personal attacks while very capably pursuing the Rights and Democracy imbroglio. The Prime Minister must be somewhat chagrined that the prorogation gambit was a bust. Figure skater Joannie Rochette set a standard for grace and fortitude that could infect the whole country. Maybe the parliamentary session will start with new civility - but I doubt it.



Scott Reid (former communications director for Paul Martin, and principal with the speechwriting company Feschuk-Reid [<http://feschuk-reid.com>]): The third session of Canada's 40th Parliament will be all about Stephen Harper. His political character - and his pending economic program of sharp deficit reduction. These are the twin columns upon which the policy and partisan debates of coming months will stand.

One gets the feeling that's just the way the Prime Minister wants it. Yet strangely, that's also what the opposition desires. And when more than one political party sees advantage in the same circumstance it can only mean a single thing: Somebody's gotta be wrong.

Of course, being wrong is something Mr. Harper has become reacquainted with over the past while. By proroguing Parliament a day before New Year's Eve, the Prime Minister placed a poor bet with his party's political fortunes.

He gambled that Canadians wouldn't really care. Sure, he assumed that a few fusty elites would work themselves into a lather on the op-ed pages. But what the hell, they were always going to vote against him anyway. His bet backfired. Prorogation pissed people off. And his indifference to their anger melted a double-digit lead in the polls to a statistical tie with the Liberals.

A second bet is also about to come due. Mr. Harper gambled that people would forget his real motivation for closing down Parliament: the string of incoherent arguments used to weave the fiction that official Ottawa had no credible warning about mistreatment of Afghan detainees. Whether he wins that bet remains to be seen. But new hearings coupled with new demands for secret documents lengthen the odds.

Together these issues invite voters to remember what they like least about Stephen Harper - a Nixonesque leader who craves control, detests dissent and hesitates not a second to unleash the full fury of his office on those who dare to disagree with him.

Nevertheless, it is the 2010 federal budget that will serve as the real catalyst for the next great political divide. And there should be little doubt as to its principal author. Jim Flaherty will read the words but the content will reflect Mr. Harper's political philosophy to the core.

Looking like a parade of generals eager to wage their last war, the Prime Minister and his cabinet will use the budget to anoint deficit reduction as *cause célèbre* - a priority that rises above all others and, incidentally, justifies his personal vision of a smaller, weaker national government less able to help Canadians face the challenges of tomorrow. That he has no credible plan to balance the books in the time frame he sets will bother him not at all.

But more importantly, this blinkered approach will abandon any concrete attempt to respond to the many other anxieties that grip Canada's middle class: the security of their pensions; the costs of caring for young children and

aging parents; and most of all, the need to create the kind of good, well-paying jobs necessary to maintain our standard of living.

For a leader so ruthlessly focused on retail politics, Mr. Harper is leaving himself dangerously disconnected from his coveted constituency of middle-class working families.

There is great room for an alternative to the Conservative economic prescription. One that still balances the budget but takes a less aggressive path. One that recognizes how different this moment is from 1993 when our deficit-to-GDP ratio had reached crisis proportions. One that, above all else, speaks to and serves the needs of the great middle-class of our country upon whom our long-term economic vitality ultimately depends.

Stephen Harper has made himself the signal political issue of our day and the new session will only reinforce that dynamic. It is an odd strategy. In a minority Parliament, there is usually advantage in placing the onus firmly on "the other guy." It was that approach that sank Stéphane Dion. It seems doubly strange therefore, that Mr. Harper has suddenly determined to make it all about him. It's another bet from a fellow who has not gambled well of late.



Greg Lyle (former chief of staff for Manitoba premier Gary Filmon, and managing director of the Innovative Research Group [<http://www.innovativeresearch.ca>]): These days it seems every six months or so Canadian politics changes fundamentally. Tory fortunes have risen and fallen in Quebec. Liberals leaders have come and gone. This new parliamentary session will open and continue this pattern of change as the political climate shifts yet again.

The most important change for me as a policy wonk is that Canada's fragile policy consensus is starting to approach its best-before date. The financial crisis and the stimulus plan have been the focus for the past year. All parties signed on to the need for certainty and the direction of the plan. But the stimulus agenda will wind down this year, opening up the question of what is next on the economy and leaving room for new issues to emerge.

A number of policy questions climbing onto the agenda where the answers are either unclear or debatable:

- » What should our economic strategy once the stimulus is over?
- » How do we balance the budget and on what timetable?
- » How do we deal with looming liabilities associated with our aging population?
- » What is the federal role in health care when the current funding arrangements expire?
- » What is next for Canada in Afghanistan?
- » What, if anything, should Canada be doing at home and abroad on climate change?

This is exciting. All of these questions have been on the front page and in the op-ed sections over the past months and are likely to remain in play for months to come.

Today's Globe features an in-depth article focusing on some of the issues from our aging population. This is much more meaningful than the typical discussion of who said what to whom and when did they say it.

However, as much as my inner wonk is looking forward to more fundamental policy debate than we have had in a long time, the reality is that Question Period and "gotcha" politics will drive the bulk of the news coverage. The question is will the opposition make these stories work for them or will they be the political equivalent of empty calories.

The second most important change is that the political climate is far more competitive than it has been for a year. The Liberal Party has stopped defeating itself and started to focus on defeating the government. Its actions show a party that seems to understand that in most turnover elections, governments are defeated, oppositions are not elected.

With that in mind, the goal of all the opposition parties will be to raise the level of outrage against the government in order to drive time for a change. The Afghan torture issue can be expected to re-emerge, not for its own sake but because ever since Watergate what has mattered is the cover-up, not the break in. We will hear lots about the airport incident in Charlottetown. The opposition will shine a spotlight on Maxine Bernier in hopes of building on the negative publicity the government generated in Copenhagen.

The bottom line is that while there will be more substantive debate on policy than we have seen in many years in the op-ed pages, the session will be focused on opposition attempts to fill the front pages with scandal and controversy. Some things never change.

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