

## CANADA'S SUDDEN DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT HITS A NERVE

Perhaps this cynical prorogation was the straw that broke the camel's back.

By Murray Dobbin

VANCOUVER, B.C.—Prime Minister Stephen Harper has reaped a whirlwind of protest for his shutting down of Parliament. The brilliant strategist is, of course, also a calculating anti-democrat and his contempt for democracy, Canadians, and anyone who has the temerity to disagree with him has again tripped up his clever manipulation of the system. Perhaps this cynical prorogation was the straw that broke the camel's back. After four years and running roughshod over democratic traditions, institutions and principles, Canadians, who are slow to anger, have had enough.

The result is the most encouraging political development in 20 years, since the broad movement against free trade in 1987-88. That movement successfully tapped into Canadian core values, brought together social justice organizations, labour and other civil society groups and won the hearts and minds of Canadians on the issue (only to be defeated by the first-past-the-post electoral system in the 1988 election).

But that time the opposition was initiated, organized and funded by labour, the churches and social justice organizations. This time it has been purely spontaneous—begun by a Facebook member who simply wanted to express his anger (see today's Tyee interview with Chris White). Today, while there are still lots of organizations, there are no genuine movements. After years of slow decline all of the movements which once commanded attention (as opposed to demanding it) have faded into obscurity—especially for the general population these movements used to influence.

Indeed it could be argued that the decline of these movements is what permitted the coming to power of Harper.

It is no coincidence that the most productive period for good social policy, the 1960s and early 1970s, paralleled the time when movements—student, anti-poverty, anti-war, labour, women and aboriginal— were at their strongest.

Today, they are at their weakest. The labour movement—with its considerable capacity for analysis, research and financial resources—is virtually AWOL in the struggle against Harper and his right-wing policies. Civil society organizations for the most part are demoralized and confused about what to do next.

The environmental movement is hampered by its failure to understand the exercise of political power, and is stymied by the Harper government's total rejection of their agenda and its refusal to even engage in the debate. The women's movement—

1:

which moved issues far broader than just women's equality when it was a force—has been mostly dormant for a decade. The once-radical aboriginal movement is now little more than a collection of quasi-governmental bureaucracies whose interests are rooted in the status-quo. Despite the tragedy of the Afghan war and widespread Canadian opposition to it, the peace movement is almost invisible. Several efforts have been made in the past ten years to re-constitute the Action Canada Network, the powerful antifree trade coalition, but to no avail.

As a result, the NDP, traditionally the party that was able and willing to move into the space created by social and labour movements, has become hyper-cautious, fearful of proposing anything outside a narrow range of small 'l' liberal policies and sometimes—as with the tough-on-crime issue— moving far to the right.

And so, the left—extra-Parliamentary and Parliamentary—is put in the position of leading from behind. A close examination of Canadians' stated values demonstrates that they are far ahead of the organizations that have historically provided them with leadership. That is one of the most amazing aspects of this democracy movement. It has bypassed the moribund progressive organizations and taken the fight straight to the government, tapping directly into Canadian values and dismay over the state of their democracy. This is an unmediated, spontaneous, grassroots movement—a welling-up of outrage at an arrogant, quasidictatorship. It's as if, tired of waiting for the traditional organizations to speak for them, Canadians who care deeply for their country are taking matters into their own hands.

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But what happens now? After last month's incredibly successful demonstrations—60 of them, with great turn outs, including over 3,500 in Ottawa—will the movement continue until democracy is restored and Harper and his wrecking crew are sent packing? The movement has the potential to re-energize progressive movements of all kinds, across the country. Let's hope that it grows and matures, because if it does not there is every likelihood that Harper will continue dismantling the country; not just its institutions, but the social programs and activist government that Canadians have built and still support. Indeed, he has promise as much with his repeated warning about the coming "restraint."

And what of the labour movement which used to help initiate and lead such movements? Here is their chance to assist this one by providing it, with no strings attached, the resources it needs to continue growing and developing into a mature, permanent movement. No existing organization or combination of organizations has, at the moment, the moral authority to provide the needed leadership. But they can provide solidarity and material support. And then they might find their way again and add their voices, and those of their members, to the call for democracy.

There is a real opportunity here for change. The anger at the shutting down of Parliament is sticking to Harper as several polls, over several weeks, indicate that the Conservatives are now tied with the Liberals. A genuine movement with broadly

popular goals of democratic reforms—including new legislation putting restrictions on the use of prorogation, a proportional representation electoral system, and increased checks and balances on the currently unfettered executive power—could form the basis of a rewriting of the Canadian political system.