

DISASTER PUTS PM'S PROROGATION RECKONING ON HOLD

Haiti's earthquake has changed the channel in Canadian politics to an extent the Conservatives never could

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Today is the day Stephen Harper's decision to shut down Parliament should have come back to haunt him, as opposition parties gather in Ottawa to draw attention to what would have been a back-to-work Monday for MPs.

Instead, the eyes of the world will be drawn to Montreal, where global dignitaries including Hillary Clinton and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner are gathering as guests of Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister, Lawrence Cannon, to plan the rebuilding of earthquake-ravaged Haiti.

The Haitian disaster of Jan. 12 has changed the channel in Canadian politics to an extent the Conservatives never could after the public backlash that greeted Mr. Harper's Dec. 30 decision to shutter Parliament until March 3.

Responding to the earthquake has provided Mr. Harper an opportunity to showcase his managerial skills in spearheading humanitarian relief efforts — and it's distracted attention from the still-heated prorogation debate.

Canada's been quick off the mark in reacting to the Haitian tragedy, sending nearly 2,000 soldiers in this country's largest-ever disaster relief effort.

Canada has also taken the lead with initiatives such as the rebuilding conference in Montreal.

"It has allowed the Prime Minister to remind [Canadians] of how strong a leader he is, how decisive he can be when it comes to doing something," Conservative strategist Goldy Hyder said, adding that "Quebeckers particularly like decisive leadership ... even if they disagree with it.

"From that old Chinese proverb, which I use with the greatest of respect, crises can be opportunities as well," he said.



Figure 1 A man jogs on Parliament Hill as the Peace Tower is lit up in the colours of the Haitian flag on Friday, the evening of a major televised fundraising effort for the country. PAWEL DWULIT/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Canada's response to the earthquake has dominated the news to date. Conservative cabinet ministers have held news conferences every day since the quake hit. Ottawa has relaxed immigration restrictions to provide refuge to Haitians with family ties in Canada. Aid dollars have been announced, then increased — and then increased again on Saturday, when Ottawa said there would be no cap on its pledge to match donations from individual Canadians for Haiti. (These contributions have already exceeded \$67-million.)

Mr. Hyder said he thinks Canadians see the Harper government's Haitian response as "the right thing to do," rather than as an effort motivated by political calculations to put prorogation behind it.

"Humanity took over politics and any other agenda."

There's no evidence the Conservative government's record on Haiti to date has earned it back the political support it appeared to lose after proroguing Parliament — a move critics said was a bid to kill the momentum of opposition-led hearings into the torture of Afghan prisoners.

Opposition parties say they don't think Canadians are distracted by Haiti or rebuilding efforts such as today's Montreal conference — which will also feature Haitian Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive.

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"We're a big and complex country and are capable of following more than one issue at a time," NDP Leader Jack Layton said.

He said the Saturday rallies against prorogation that took place across the country are proof Canadians are still angry at Mr. Harper's behaviour.

Media estimates of the crowds at demonstrations in 13 of Canada's biggest cities ranged from about 10,000 to 14,500. Former NDP press secretary Ian Capstick, compiling figures from protesters, journalists and bloggers, estimated that protests in 32 communities, including New York, exceeded 27,000.

Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae said all Canadians share a preoccupation with what's happening in Haiti, but this doesn't mean Mr. Harper should get away with closing Parliament and stifling political debate among MPs.

"The public wants its government to be engaged in a major international crises, but also thinks the House of Commons should be sitting."

PARLIAMENT ON PAUSE

Disaster Puts PM's Prorogation Reckoning on Hold

A prorogued Parliament is a massive campus of historic buildings running at half speed.

Last year, the cost of running the House of Commons was \$417-million. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to delay today's scheduled resumption of Parliament until March 3 saves some of that money, but most of the employees are on the job whether the House is sitting or not.

NOT WORKING

About 220 people, including:

all staff in the parliamentary restaurant

some of those in the print shop who oversee the production of Hansard, the official record of Parliament

massage therapists

interpreters and translators

WORKING

About 1,870 full-time employees, including:

drivers of shuttle buses connecting key government buildings and the fleet of trucks that bring food, paper and furniture in and out of the precinct

parliamentary pages

maintenance workers

the Parliamentary Press Gallery

Daniel Leblanc

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