

GRIT PLAN: LET HARPER BE HARPER

Most Canadians want Parliament to be there, just to prove democracy exists

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Figure 1 The cost of misreading the democratic impulse?

First, all the experts said no Canadian would vote based on the issue of delivering Afghan prisoners for torture. But Stephen Harper killed Parliament anyway, to squelch that debate. Why? What did he know? Perhaps what anyone studying PR at a community college learns: that impressions are cumulative and, as a series moves along, each new one weighs heavier. Firing nuclear watchdog + global black eye re tar sands + ending KAIROS funding + torture scandal = bad election news.

So he annuls Parliament, a procedural act, not a personal one, like attacking conscientious civil servants. He tells the CBC's Peter Mansbridge that prorogation isn't No. 1 on anyone's radar, and the experts agree again. Pollster Nik Nanos says it won't hurt him. "Hardly anyone cares," writes Margaret Wente. Yet, now half of Canadians say they are watching the issue "closely," and he's in a virtual tie with a Liberal leader who hasn't even been in the country.

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This comes from thinking that Canadians only want a "capable manager" (The Globe's John Ibbitson and Gloria Galloway) who can "lead us back to ... balanced budgets" (the National Post's John Ivison). It's the cost of misreading the democratic impulse.

The first political uproar I ever knew came in 1957 when I was a kid in school. The Liberals had held power for 22 years and were great managers. They managed Canada through a depression, the Second World War and postwar prosperity. But in the "pipeline debate" that year, they invoked "closure," though only to end debate, not kill Parliament. It reeked of arrogance, and they lost power to Prairie populist John Diefenbaker. It shocked the experts.

Lorne Gunter says in the National Post that most Canadians today couldn't tell you if Parliament is in session, and he's probably right. But most Canadians don't watch the CBC, either, yet they often want it there, just to prove the country and its culture exist. The same for Parliament: It proves democracy exists. I think most people sense it's a pile of political pretense that is only minimally democratic, and that

elections are what they give us instead of a real democracy in which we'd have a genuine say.

But why shut it down? At least it's a token acknowledgment of what we deserve. And even as a pile, it is the achievement of centuries of popular political contestation, from the Magna Carta through the Chartists, the Canadian rebellions of 1837-38, the women's suffrage movement etc. These are historic, if half-assed, victories that ought to be built on, not trampled on.

Canada went to war twice for "democracy." Today, Canadians come back from Afghanistan dead to protect our democratic values and way of life. Do the Harperites think nobody gives a damn when you defecate all over those values, even if it's a symbolic defecation over symbolic values and a largely symbolic way of life? Democracy isn't just practical, it's aspirational. It's about trying to exert some control over your life, individually and collectively. Otherwise, what's the point of a life? People draw a line, maybe more so when it's about symbols, because once those are gone, there's nothing left to take pride in and hold out hope for. So don't treat our Parliament as a piece in your private chess game of power, eh? Show respect.

It's also a slap at the Reform Party's heritage of democratic renewal, which flowed from its Prairie populism. But Stephen Harper arrived out west from suburban Toronto, and was mainly attracted by the party's right-wing ideology; clearly, the democratic element wasn't part of its appeal.

As for Michael Ignatieff, I think doing nothing is working. Let Stephen Harper be Stephen Harper. His historic mission is simply to deny a Conservative majority in the next election, after which both leaders might move on, allowing us yet another shot at the elusive goal of a more truly democratic politics.

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