

Canada's Parliament

# HARPER GOES PROROGUE

Jan 7th 2010

From The Economist print edition

Parliamentary scrutiny may be tedious, but democracies cannot afford to dispense with it

CANADIAN ministers, it seems, are a bunch of Gerald Fords. Like the American president, who could not walk and chew gum at the same time, they cannot, apparently, cope with Parliament's deliberations while dealing with the country's economic troubles and the challenge of hosting the Winter Olympic games. This was the argument put forward by the spokesman for

Stephen Harper, the Conservative prime minister, after his boss on December 30th abruptly suspended, or "prorogued", Canada's Parliament until March 3rd.



Figure 1 Getty Images

Mr Harper's supporters might argue that there is nothing wrong with this. Precedent allows it, and Canada is a decent, well-run place, where much is decided at the provincial level. Since most countries already have too many laws, a pause for parliamentary reflection might count as progress. Some places, such as Texas, manage well with only a part-time legislature. Politicians' ritual slanging matches should not be allowed to distract Canadians from weightier battles, such as the bobsleigh, the giant slalom or round-robin curling. Come to think about it, why not shut down Parliament altogether, perhaps until the economy is growing again at full throttle? At least that would help cut the federal deficit.

The argument that previous prime ministers frequently prorogued Parliament is no more convincing. In almost every case they did so only once the government had got through the bulk of its legislative business. The Parliament that Mr Harper prorogued still had 36 government bills before it, including measures that form part of the prime minister's much-vaunted crackdown on crime. When it reconvenes, those bills will have to start again from scratch. Past prorogations were typically brief ([see article](#)). This time sessions will be separated by a gap of 63 days.

Never mind what his spin doctors say: Mr Harper's move looks like naked self-interest. His officials faced grilling by parliamentary committees over whether they misled the House of Commons in denying knowledge that detainees handed over to

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the local authorities by Canadian troops in Afghanistan were being tortured. The government would also have come under fire for its lack of policies to curb Canada's abundant carbon emissions. Prorogation means that such committees—which carry out the essential democratic task of scrutinising government—will have to be formed anew in March. That will also allow Mr Harper to gain immediate control of committees in the appointed Senate, where his Conservatives are poised to become the biggest party.

Mr Harper has form. He prorogued Parliament last winter, too—to dodge a short-lived threat by the three opposition parties to bring his minority government down. Having gone to the polls three times since 2004 Canadians do not want another election. He might say that governing in a minority obliges him to play fast and loose with parliamentary nicety. He has nursed the economy and he has confounded those who feared that he would impose his supporters' loathing of abortion and liking for the death penalty on a generally tolerant country.

A legislature matters more than the luge

Mr Harper is a competent tactician with a ruthless streak. He bars most ministers from talking to the media; he has axed some independent watchdogs; he has binned campaign promises to make government more open and accountable. Now he is subjecting Parliament to prime-ministerial whim. He may be right that most Canadians care more about the luge than the legislature, but that is surely true only while their decent system of government is in good hands. They may soon conclude that it isn't.

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