

Globe editorial

LESSON LEARNED

Stephen Harper's elimination of spring break won't undo the damage, but it is tacit admission outrage expressed by Canadians has resonated in Ottawa

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper's political calculation to prorogue Parliament was contemptuous of democracy and profoundly disrespectful to Canadians. Evidence that he appears to have recognized the error of his calculation is welcome news. It also suggests this sort of behaviour will not soon be repeated.

The Conservative government has announced plans to cancel two weeks of spring recess for MPs. As this time off is traditionally booked for holidays by federal politicians, the link between prorogation and the disappearance of spring break seems obvious. Having been stung by criticism for cutting the parliamentary work schedule in January and February, Mr. Harper is now proposing to lengthen it in March and April to make amends.

The cancellation of Parliament for several months, purportedly to shift attention to the upcoming federal budget, was an unnecessary hiatus that diminished the democratic rights of all Canadians. While the elimination of spring break won't undo the damage already done, the reversal does serve several useful purposes.

First, it is a tacit admission that the outrage expressed by Canadians has resonated in Ottawa. Mr. Harper's political calculation in December was that most voters cared little about when, or if, Parliament sat. Yet through street-corner rallies, radio call-ins, letter-writing, Facebook and assorted other means, this presumption has been roundly disproved. Canadians have made it clear they expect the institution of Parliament to be respected. The Conservatives' precipitous drop in polling numbers puts an even sharper point on this expectation.

Second, the public hostility and subsequent correction by Ottawa suggest it will be a long time before this or another prime minister attempts to prorogue Parliament with partisan purpose, although as a precaution Parliament should adopt the Liberal proposal that future prorogations require the consent of the House of Commons in certain circumstances.

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Lesson Learned

Proroguing can be a legitimate tool. When a government has achieved the bulk of its agenda and wishes to begin again, it makes sense to wipe the slate clean and start over. And yet Mr. Harper's two uses of this manoeuvre fell far short of that mark. Rather, prorogation was becoming a way for Mr. Harper's minority government to short-circuit the legitimate powers of Parliament to its own advantage. The disappearance of the MPs' spring break should be seen as an acknowledgment that this tactic has failed. It is to be hoped it will not be used in this way again.

A precedent has been set: Politicians disregard Parliament at their peril.

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