

PROROGATION AVOIDS GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN MANY OTHER WAYS: CONACHER

Duff Conacher, coordinator Democracy Watch, Ottawa, Ontario in a letter to the editor of "The Hill Times" 18-JAN-2010

There are three other important government accountability situations not mentioned in any media coverage so far that the federal Conservatives are avoiding through the arbitrary proroguing of Parliament by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, all of which would likely have been reported on in February.

First, the ethics commissioner is investigating and will rule on whether the handing out of Conservative Party-labelled government spending cheques by several Cabinet ministers and MPs was allowed under federal ethics rules.

Second, the ethics commissioner, commissioner of lobbying, and Elections Canada are investigating and will rule on fundraising events by a Conservative Cabinet minister and Parliamentary secretary.

And third, the auditor general would likely release a report or two on government spending practices by various departments and agencies.

So while the Parliamentary budget officer has pledged to continue to release his reports (a power he would lose if he was made into a full officer of Parliament), the officers of Parliament listed above cannot issue their rulings and reports to Parliament in February because Prime Minister Harper shut down Parliament.

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If Prime Minister Harper's Speech from the Throne when Parliament opens is actually an election platform, and the Conservatives' proposed budget their spending plan, and he then immediately calls a snap election (again in violation of his own fixed-election-date law), none of these key government accountability reports and rulings will see the light of day until after the election.

To ensure proroguing is not used in the future to avoid accountability in this way, all good government watchdog agencies must be given the power to release their reports and rulings whenever they are completed, whether or not Parliament is open.

In addition, the Inquiries Act should be changed to empower a majority of leaders of parties in the House of Commons to initiate a public inquiry, to overcome the resistance of Cabinet ministers to initiate independent investigations of alleged wrongdoing by them and/or staff, officials, departments or agencies for which they are responsible. Sometimes opposition parties would unjustifiably initiate a public

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inquiry, but they would pay a political price for doing so, and frivolous inquiries would like shut down quickly after finding no evidence of actual wrongdoing.

The rules should be changed to allow the Prime Minister to request prorogation of Parliament by the Governor General only if the Prime Minister can show that the government has completed all of their pledged actions and decisions from the last Speech from the Throne, or that the national situation has changed in such significant ways that a new government plan is needed immediately, or when an election is called.

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