

Globe editorial

SILENT PARLIAMENT, FORGOTTEN ROOTS

Stephen Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament is an abrogation of the principles he and his party arose to defend

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Today, Parliament sits silent, shuttered by one man. It is a sad day for Canadians who see how estranged their government has become from the country's democratic lifeblood. Not only that: Stephen Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament is an abrogation of the principles he and his party arose to defend.

Canada has a parliamentary government, by the executive (the prime minister and the cabinet, as delegated by the Queen and her governor-general) but accountable and responsible to the people, via its representatives (the House of Commons). This, in short, is our democracy, established after considerable struggle. But it is not a convenience or a steady state, and it has been tested by overreaching executives from its inception. From time to time, an unease about that grasp has moved Canadians to action. For instance, in the late 1980s, an era of backroom constitutional deal-making, it helped prompt the birth of a new party, and these words in one of that party's foundational documents:

"Many of our most serious problems as a country can be traced to the apathy and non-involvement of Canadians in public affairs, and to decisions that too frequently ignore the popular will.... We believe in accountability of elected representatives to the people who elect them, and that the duty of elected members to their constituents should supersede their obligations to their political parties."

Stephen Harper wrote that. The words are from the 1988 platform he penned as policy director for the nascent Reform Party.

This was no mere platitude. The democratic ethos that gave rise to the Reform Party was instrumental in its 1993 breakthrough, leading to the ultimate demise of the Progressive Conservatives. It was carried by Reformers in Parliament; for a time, Preston Manning even sat in the second row in the House chamber to illustrate that he was an elected MP on a par with all others. It was maintained in subsequent party platforms. It catalyzed grassroots interest in the party, inspiring Canadians to



Figure 1 The Peace Tower is seen behind a sign mocking Prime Minister Stephen Harper during an Ottawa anti-prorogation rally on Saturday, Jan. 23, 2010. The Canadian Press

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get involved in politics. To this day, the membership of the successor Conservative Party of Canada is the largest of any party in Canada.

As Prime Minister, Mr. Harper has eroded the institution his party sought to defend. He is not the first prime minister to do so. But Mr. Harper has gone to new lengths, using prerogative powers to shut Parliament itself. MPs – the tribunes of the people – have accepted each incursion on their authority, regardless of party stripe.

Today, Parliament is closed, while Canadians hang on to the notion that they live under a parliamentary system of government. We don't elect our prime minister, we elect our MPs to form a government, and then to hold the prime minister and his ministers to account. But the present reality is one in which the executive increasingly directs the activities of the legislature. That's something at odds with the ideals on which the country, and the Reform-Conservative tradition, were built. Canadians have taken notice.