

# TACTICAL DIMINISHMENT

Canadians are right to wonder how the Prime Minister's insulting prorogation ploy fits with the Conservative commitment to restore public trust in government

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It took a week, but Prime Minister Stephen Harper has finally deigned to answer questions about his decision to prorogue Parliament until March. In an interview with the CBC's Peter Mansbridge, Mr. Harper called it a "fairly standard procedure," and a "routine constitutional matter." While Mr. Harper has set no constitutional precedent, the manner of the prorogation, and its effect, are neither standard or routine. His actions constitute an insult to Parliament, including to Governor-General Michaëlle Jean, and can serve only to diminish Canada's national institutions. It is a high price to pay for a minor tactical convenience.

If Mr. Harper were sincerely interested in "standard procedure," he would take time from his efforts to "recalibrate the government's agenda" to consult the Parliamentary Calendar, laid out in the Standing Orders. This is what parliamentarians themselves have set out as the normal parliamentary cycle, and the calendar provides for 135 sitting days each year. Mr. Harper has ensured that expectation cannot be fulfilled in 2010. The House of Commons will sit for, at most, about 110 days this year. If there is an election, as many predict, that number will be reduced to about 80 days. That would be too short a time to allow Parliament to attend to the business of the nation.

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There is no safeguard to prevent such abuse. Constitutional experts agree the Governor-General was bound to accept the advice of Mr. Harper and permit the government to "recalibrate" — or play a game of hide-and-seek with the opposition over the production of documents on the detainee issue, even if the hide part is to last for two months. As Mr. Harper assured Mr. Mansbridge, it is the order paper that is wiped clean by prorogation. "When Parliament prorogues, for example, private members' legislation is not broken off, it continues," Mr. Harper said, "so the opposition's work will continue." He's right. It is government legislation, including its crime bills, some of them bills that have already been introduced three times, that were wiped from the order paper. And Mr. Harper thinks this is a good thing?

Perhaps most tellingly, Mr. Harper refused to observe the niceties of Canada's traditions. He made his "request" of the Governor-General not in person, but in a telephone call. It might seem like a minor point, but it is revealing. The constitutional expert C.E.S. Franks, a professor at Queen's University, called Mr. Harper's actions "an affront to the dignity of the office of Governor-General," displaying a casual arrogance toward Canada's institutions.

Canadians would be right to wonder how any of this fits with the Conservatives' commitment to restore the public's trust in government.