

## WE NEED MORE THAN RALLIES TO OBJECT TO PROROGATION

Prorogation hands to the opposition parties on a silver platter a two-fold opportunity to redeem citizen respect for MPs.

By Henry McCandless<sup>1</sup>

VICTORIA, B.C. — We need more than rallies objecting to prorogation as “undemocratic.” Rallies won’t change a government’s underlying agenda. A huge banner at the Victoria rally proclaimed: “Canadians Wake Up.” Wake up, indeed, but then to do what? Rules against prorogation won’t change a government’s intentions. Nor is it the issue of when the Prime Minister is to be “let out of the penalty box” on his prorogation decision. We have prorogation because citizens have never set performance and public explanation standards for their elected representatives.

Having the House work properly and earning citizens’ respect for its MPs doesn’t require rules as much as a self-regulating influence on those making governance decisions that will serve the public good. The missing influence is public accountability, which means the obligation of government to give full, fair and public explanation before the fact of its intentions, for whom, and its reasons. This allows knowledgeable public challenge of them, which can lead to loss of public trust.

Causing self-destruction of an authority’s intentions through loss of citizen trust is more powerful than oppositions trying to build up restraining public “pressure.” Authorities with more power can simply crank up their driving forces. Intentions tend to self-destruct if enough informed citizens see the underlying real intentions as leading to harm or injustice.

Holding effectively to account extracts public explanations from authorities that make visible what they intend, for whom, and why, and their performance standards. This accounting obligation cannot be refused in a democracy. Thus the key to citizens controlling what goes on in their society is to require their elected representatives to require government and other authorities to produce timely, public, full and fair explanation, both before and after the fact, on how they are carrying out responsibilities that affect the public in important ways. Financial statements don’t do this, and reports by auditors general to their legislatures are yet to argue for full and fair public explanation before the fact by executive

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governments of what they intend, for whom, and why. They can do this because public accountability is nonpartisan.

But to be effective, the obligation to produce full and fair public accounting has to be in the law. Our current legislation across Canada sets powers and duties for people but not their public explanation obligations. Financial statements are a small part of the public accountings that citizens need to obtain, as the U.S. president George Washington put it in 1796, “a right understanding of matters.”

Full and fair public explanation by government earns public trust. Refusal by an executive government to give it lowers public trust, with the result that society doesn't work properly. Recent federal examples are the government responsibility and public accounting failures in Chalk River isotope supply back-up and in diplomat Richard Colvin's Afghanistan detainee safety alerts. Then there is Copenhagen and a list of other responsibilities.

Yet prorogation hands to the opposition on a silver platter a two-fold opportunity to redeem citizen respect for MPs. It is to have ready, on House resumption:

- ✿ The public accountability questions that the executive government must answer fully and fairly—such as requiring the PM to explain to the House the specific performance standards he has set for his ministers' public explanations of how they are discharging their respective responsibilities. These include how they adequately inform themselves for their decisions. The PM saying, “We have House conventions for that” is no answer.
- ✿ The essentials of a genuine Canada Public Accountability Act requiring full and fair public explanation of authorities' key intentions and reasons, their performance standards and the impacts. These provisions would without question resonate with Canadians. The current government's fraudulently-named “Accountability” Act is about rules of conduct having little to do with citizens' needs and not being about full and fair public explanation by those with the responsibilities.

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Accountability stems from responsibility. To the extent that oppositions are not just ritually fighting for power, they are concerned with government's responsibilities. For each major responsibility of the federal executive government identified by opposition MPs, the opposition can set out the basic standards for government's public explanations that they think citizens are entitled to see met. In fact, because full and fair public accounting is both a society imperative and nonpartisan, and is not a political policy, the Governor General is free to withhold assent to a bill that lacks effective public explanation obligations for those having important responsibilities under the bill.

It is not a coincidence that Rex Murphy on TV saluted Liberal MP Keith Martin as not getting the recognition he deserves for his work in Parliament. But maybe it is

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because there he is near unique in understanding public accountability and working for it.

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