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WHY 2010 MIGHT NOT BE A LUCKY YEAR FOR TORIES

The former NDP campaign chief weighs in on Canadian politics and more
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The bad news is the Stephen Harper got away with padlocking Parliament in the fall of 2008, in order to avoid a confidence vote.

This profoundly undemocratic and illegitimate act — which threw such ugly light on the vacuousness of the office of our Governor-General, the vulnerability of our democracy, and the over-mighty nature of our executive — was made possible for many reasons. Including ugly ethnic sloganeering, a then-largely sympathetic English-language chattering class, and the inestimable advantage (for Mr. Harper) that Stéphane Dion was about to be coupé by Michael Ignatieff, who was of a mind to play along with the Conservatives for his own reasons. And so, Mr. Harper clung to office.

The good news is that Stephen Harper doesn't seem to be getting away with it a second time.

He padlocked Canada's Parliament once again in December 2009, this time to avoid an enquiry into the treatment of enemy combatants, and to permit his cabinet and caucus to bask in the Olympics. Canadians were divided about this government's contempt for Canadian democracy a year ago. They seem much clearer in their minds this time. The Prime Minister and his team have done themselves some serious and possibly lasting political damage.

A pretty bad start of the year. And quite conceivably, things aren't going to be getting better anytime soon.

What do the smart folks in the PMO believe is going to happen next?

They believe that Canadians will forget about their Prime Minister's contempt for our democracy, and will instead soon settle into patriotic cheering for our athletes in the Olympics — a tide of patriotism that will rub off on the government and raise its numbers once again.

It might work. But it is a truism in politics that it is usually a better idea to keep well clear of large athletic events, since they provide crowds with an opportunity to let their governments know what they think of them, in this case on worldwide television. Pierre Trudeau was routinely booed at Grey Cup games, for example.

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So what kind of reception can the Prime Minister and his highly unpopular HST increase look forward to in British Columbia?

Here's my advice to Conservative ministers and MPs at the Olympics: sit right next to B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell. If you're going to do this, do it right.

Next up will be a Throne Speech and budget. But it seems unlikely, given the federal government's eleven-figure Tory deficit, that there will be much in the way of additional crowd-pleasing tax cuts or spending. The fiscal chickens are coming home to roost, as they generally do under post-Ronald Reagan Conservative governments. As for the Tory legislative program, Mr. Harper's principal legislative goal is to run up Canada's prison population. Shining a light on justice bills will underline that the Prime Minister killed all of them in December by proroguing the House. The return of the House in March may therefore pop an Olympic bubble if there is one, and mostly remind Canadians of this government's contempt for their legislature.

Mr. Harper then hopes to bask in a G8 meeting, which he will host north of Toronto later this year.

But as Italy's Silvio Berlusconi discovered when hosting his own G8 in L'Aquila, such meetings attract hundreds (if not thousands) of journalists from all around the world. And international summitry being what it is these days, that means thousands of journalists with not much to do. Except tell their viewers and readers about the host country and its government.

At the Italian summit, the world learned a lot more than Mr. Berlusconi might have liked about his numerous distressing public and private issues.

Will our Prime Minister, with this government's equally distressing environmental and anti-democratic record, fare better? Or will Canadians (and millions of others) be reading all about unrestricted tar sands development and about one of the democratic world's most undemocratic governments — about a Canadian prime minister who believes his country's national legislature reports to him, as *The Economist* put it? Will reading this on the homepages of CNN and the Times of London make Canadians feel fonder of this government?

So then, Mr. Harper will greet a G20 meeting.

Which threatens to be an awkward event, since the Harper government appears to be stumbling over Korea, who will be “co-hosting” the Canadian meeting and then hosting their own G20 meeting in Korea by themselves later in the year (some entertaining grumpiness about this mess here).

Possibly Canadians will find all of this inspiring.

But possibly instead Mr. Harper set the tone for the year in its very first days with his continuing indefensible contempt for our national Parliament — a gift that may keep on giving for some time.

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