

PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

Introduction

Focus

When Parliament returned after a winter break, the big question was would there be a spring election? The government and the opposition parties claimed they didn't want one. But with a budget looming, all of them were getting ready. This *News in Review* story reviews some of the issues that may lead to that election and the state of the major parties that will contest it.

Further Research

Elections Canada is the independent, non-partisan agency responsible for conducting federal elections and referendums. Visit their Web site at www.elections.ca/home.aspx for an update on this, and other, elections.

Will there be a federal election sometime soon?

It certainly seems that politicians are preparing for one. While none of the party leaders claim they want it, all of them have warned their members to be ready to campaign as soon as the budget is presented to Parliament at the end of March. The minority Conservative government needs the support of at least one other party to pass the budget. The Liberals have promised to oppose the government's fiscal plans unless they are drastically modified. The Bloc Québécois and the NDP have both made significant demands for financial measures that the government claims the country cannot afford to meet.

Indeed, financial problems, fiscal responsibility, and future expenditures are central to this session of Parliament, and will likely be central to a possible election. The Conservatives are positioning themselves as the party that protected Canada from the worst effects of the recent recession and the only party that should be entrusted with economic recovery and controlling Canada's burgeoning debt load.

The Liberals argue that they were the party that first brought rising federal debt under control, and that their approach—

including reversing recent corporate tax cuts—will make it possible to maintain and improve social spending while also controlling the debt. The NDP also argue for reversing tax cuts, insisting that more needs to be spent on areas like health care and pensions.

Of course, there are other issues: Canada's role in foreign affairs (including Afghanistan), the conflict between the rights of Parliament and the powers of the prime minister, and new laws toughening punishments for criminals that will result in many more people sentenced to Canada's prisons. These are only some of these issues facing both Parliamentarians and, if an election is called, the voters.

Despite all this, poll after poll indicates that Canadians do not want another election at this point. Even more disturbing is an apparent lack of interest in the entire political process. This raises the question that if an election is called, will voters even turn out? In the 2008 general election, only 58 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot—the lowest percentage in Canadian history.

Will there be a 2011 spring general election? The Prime Minister himself has placed the odds at 50-50. We'll have our definitive answer at the end of March.

To Consider

While voter turnout has been low in all age groups in recent elections, young voters under 30 have shown the least interest in casting a ballot. Why do you think this is true? Are there any methods that might be used to increase election interest for younger voters?

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Video Review

Further Research

Visit the Web site of the major political parties to learn more about their policies:

- Bloc Québécois: www.blocquebecois.org
- Conservative Party of Canada: www.conservative.ca
- Green Party of Canada: www.greenparty.ca
- Liberal Party of Canada: www.liberal.ca
- New Democratic Party: www.ndp.ca

Pre-viewing Activity

1. In a small group, discuss those issues that you wish the federal government would deal with in the current Parliament. Make a list of these issues.

2. What party would you vote for if you had the opportunity to cast your vote today? Poll the members of your group and record the results.

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. How long has the Conservative Party been in power in Ottawa?

2. The Conservative government is a minority government. What does the term *minority government* mean?

3. Barry McLoughlin of McLoughlin Media describes the Conservatives' and Liberals' current advertising as "prepositioning." In this context, what is "prepositioning"?

4. What crucial government proposal will ultimately determine whether or not there is a spring election?

5. What are some of the reasons people give in the video for their lack of interest in federal politics? Give at least two.

6. What percentage of adult Canadians voted in the 2008 election?

7. If there is an election, what issue is likely to be the biggest during the campaign? Why?

8. What are the Conservative, Liberal, and NDP positions on proposed tax cuts to corporations?

9. What two other controversial government proposals are likely to become significant issues in a possible election?

10. Briefly describe why Bev Oda, the Minister of International Co-operation, is under attack by opposition members of Parliament.

Post-viewing Activity

1. Review the list of issues you prepared in the Pre-viewing Activity. Based on what you learned in the video, what would you change or add?

2. Poll your group members again to see who they would vote for in a federal election. Did any students change their vote? If so, what reasons did they give for doing so?

3. Canada is not the only country plagued by low voter turnouts; the United States generally has a percentage even lower than Canada's. But some countries, such as Australia, take an aggressive approach to the problem and levy substantial fines against voters who fail to go to the polls. As a result, about 90 per cent of the population votes.

Should Canada consider passing a law making voting in federal elections mandatory? Why or why not?

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MPs Return to the House

Did you know . . .

Information on all the bills before Parliament during a particular session, including their text, is available online at the LEGISinfo Web site at www2.parl.gc.ca/Sites/LOP/LEGISINFO/index.asp?Language=E.

Check It Out

Follow the “Oda Affair” on the CBC Web site, at www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2011/02/15/kairos-timeline.html.

Focus for Reading

In this section we examine the forthcoming budget and some of the issues that are likely to create controversy in the new session of Parliament. Once you have read through the section, make a list of the top three issues you feel are likely to be the most contentious. Compare your choices with those of three or four of your classmates. Are the selections common to each individual? Can the entire group arrive at a top-three list?

The third session of Canada’s 40th Parliament resumed on January 31, 2011. Many observers believe the session will be a short one, ending with the defeat of the Conservative minority government over its budget. The result: an election no one claims to want, but for which all parties seem to be gearing up.

The government’s program for the five-month session didn’t seem particularly ambitious. New agreements with Panama and Jordan need to be ratified. A bill that would allow the government to intern refugee claimants arriving in large groups by boat has been introduced for consideration. Also up for debate are several bills that would increase prison sentences for a variety of serious offences and impose mandatory sentences for drug offences.

The government has declared that none of its bills will be considered matters of confidence. This means that their defeat would not automatically reflect Parliament’s lack of confidence in the government and force its resignation (and an election).

But the budget is another matter. Failure to approve the budget is an automatic vote of non-confidence. The government would have to resign and an election would result. The budget and its likely contents will be discussed in the next section of this guide.

While the budget may be the only matter of confidence before the House, there will still be plenty of controversy.

Foreign Affairs

This session of Parliament had barely begun before the first major controversy in this area erupted. Bev Oda, Minister of International Co-Operation, became embroiled in a dispute over her department’s refusal to fund a Canadian aid organization called KAIROS. She has been accused of intentionally misleading Parliament because she was not truthful when giving testimony to a committee exploring the funding decision. The Speaker of the House has been asked by the Liberals to determine whether Oda has committed a breach of parliamentary privilege. The Prime Minister has refused to call for her resignation.

Other contentious issues in foreign affairs include the nature of the ongoing Afghan military mission, which is supported by the Liberals but opposed by both the Bloc Québécois and the NDP. The conduct and results of this training mission will be closely watched by all parties.

Canada’s approach to the Middle East will also likely be a central theme of Parliamentary debate, as will the government’s withdrawal of financial aid to several African countries in order to focus more intensely on a few specific partners on that continent.

Justice and Crime Legislation

The government has consistently declared itself as “tough on crime” and has passed a number of measures

Did you know . . .
Canada's Auditor General has criticized the government for making a previous untendered purchase of helicopters, calling the decision irresponsible and unnecessarily costly.

providing for tougher sentences for convicted criminals. Opposition parties are especially ready to fight a bill that calls for mandatory sentences for drug crimes. Among its requirements is that a judge be required to impose a six-month sentence for the possession of as few as six marijuana plants.

Even more controversial is bill C-49, which is the government's response to last year's arrival of a boatload of Tamil refugees in Canadian waters off the coast of British Columbia. The government has suggested (but not proven) that some of these refugees are actually terrorists. The bill provides for incarceration of all such refugees for one year, followed by five years of special probation. In effect, it creates a special class for refugees who arrive in large groups.

The Liberals argue that the wrong people are being punished, and that the human smugglers who bring the refugees to Canada should be the ones punished—and they believe that punishment should run to a maximum punishment of life in prison. They also believe that the bill violates the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees that individuals may not be arbitrarily detained in Canada.

Military Purchases

Opposition parties have expressed concern that a planned purchase of Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets

is inappropriate and too costly. The decision to buy the jets—made at the recommendation of the military—was made without putting the purchase out to tender. The government argues that the F-35 is the only jet currently capable of meeting the military's requirements, that it is compatible with U.S. military equipment, and that it will result in hundreds or thousands of job opportunities for Canadians. The opposition argues that the jets are too expensive, that a different type of plane is better suited to Canadian needs (especially for patrolling and defending the Canadian Arctic), and that all such purchases should be placed for tender with a requirement for a specific amount of Canadian content required in each plane.

The Environment

Just prior to the Christmas recess, an opposition-sponsored climate bill that had been passed by the House of Commons was defeated in the Senate. As a result, Canada currently has no legislation in effect to address the problems resulting from climate change. The issue is currently on the back burner but may well become more prominent as the year continues. The government would like to wait to create policies that dovetail with any developed in the U.S., but many observers argue the time to act on climate change is now.

Post-Reading Activity

Select one of the three contentious issues you recorded while you read this section of the *News in Review* guide. Write a short (one-page) letter addressed to your local member of Parliament stating your personal views on the issue.

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The Budget

Quote

“Now the Prime Minister has a choice. If Mr. Harper wants to head into an election showing that he is unable to put the needs of Canadians ahead of his own political goals, New Democrats are well prepared to fight that election.” — Jack Layton, leader of the New Democratic Party (February 19, 2011, canada.com)

Reading Prompt

No piece of federal Parliamentary legislation is more important than the budget. The budget presents the government’s funding and spending plans for the coming year. Parliament votes to approve those plans. If the government does not receive enough votes to pass the budget, then the government falls. The government is expected to present its 2011 budget in late March.

As you read this section, make a T-chart in your notebook to list the reasons why the 2011 budget may PASS or may FAIL.

In order for the budget to pass, the Conservative government needs the support of at least one of the opposition parties. That is because the Conservatives are a minority government; they do not hold a majority of seats in the House of Commons. In previous years the Conservatives have managed to garner enough support to have their budgets approved. For the record:

- 2006: budget passed with the support of the Bloc Québécois
- 2007: budget passed with the support of the Bloc Québécois
- 2008: budget passed because most Liberals abstained
- 2009: spring budget passed with support from the Liberals
- 2009: fall budget was opposed by the Liberals but supported by both the Bloc Québécois and the NDP
- 2010: budget passed because most Liberals abstained

In 2011, the Conservatives could have considerable difficulty finding anyone to support their plans. The Liberals are apparently fully committed to opposing the budget. Both the NDP and the Bloc have made it clear that they have significant policy requirements that must be met before they will consider offering their support.

The Biggest Issue

Legislation currently in effect permitted the Conservatives to cut Canada’s corporate tax rate on January 1, 2011, from 18 per cent to 16.5 per cent. The legislation calls for a further cut in 2012 to 15 per cent. The move will cost the government about \$6-billion in revenue this year and next. The Liberals are demanding that the legislation be repealed and the tax cuts reversed. They argue that the cuts are unaffordable at this time and can be re-introduced at a later date. The NDP are also opposed to the tax cuts.

The Conservatives argue that, even at a time when the government is running a significant deficit, the tax cuts are necessary to help corporations create more jobs and to improve their operations. Ultimately, they believe the policy will result in increasing federal revenues.

The Liberals and NDP hold the opposite view, arguing that the government cannot afford the cuts. They also argue that the tax cuts will fail to stimulate job creation and only increase corporate profits.

Winning Support

The Conservatives have little hope of support from the Liberals, who oppose not only the tax cuts but also other

Quote

"We listen to the views of other parties, whether we agree with them or not, but we do not engage in horse trading or negotiations over the budget." — Prime Minister Stephen Harper, (February 21, 2011, Reuters)

government expenditures, including the purchase of F-35 fighter jets (about \$16-billion for purchase and maintenance) and as much as \$5-billion for new prisons as a result of the government's tough-on-crime legislation. Michael Ignatieff, the Liberal leader, has said the next Liberal election platform will include tax incentives and credits for businesses, but not the tax cuts for large corporations that are part of the current program.

The Bloc Québécois has refused to support the Conservatives unless the budget contains two provisions:

- \$2.2-billion in compensation for the cost of harmonizing the provincial and federal sales taxes in the 1990s (Ontario and British Columbia both recently received compensation)
- \$2.8-billion in changes to equalization payments, transfer payments, and settlement of outstanding bills from the 1990s

It is highly unlikely that the government will respond positively to these demands, which leaves only the NDP as their potential saviours.

NDP leader Jack Layton has presented a list of specific initiatives that his party feels the budget should contain. These include:

- Removing the federal sales tax from home heating bills
- Improved Guaranteed Income Supplements (GIS) for seniors
- A commitment to enhance the Canada Pension Plan
- Boosting the number of doctors and nurses in Canada (by 1 200 doctors and 6 000 nurses)

Layton has made it clear that he expects significant measures from the government if they are to win his party's support. If the Conservatives fail to accept at least some of Layton's proposals, the NDP will definitely vote against the budget, and there will be an election in late April or early May.

To date the government has stated that it is committed to fiscal responsibility and that the NDP has grossly underestimated the cost of its proposals. They insist that the new initiatives would amount to new annual expenditures of billions of dollars.

Prime Minister Harper has himself said he thinks the odds of a spring election are about 50-50. Whether the NDP initiatives have improved those odds will soon become apparent.

For Discussion

1. Should the government consider modifying its position on tax cuts for corporations, perhaps concentrating on support for small business rather than large corporations, in order to win support for its budget from other parties? Why or why not?
2. Review the initiatives proposed by the NDP. Are there any of these that you would like to see in the 2011 budget? Why or why not?

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Calling an Election

Further Research

Check out an issue of the *Canada Gazette* online at canadagazette.gc.ca/index-eng.html.

Watch

A CBC archives video clip about the King-Byng Affair is available at http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/federal_politics/clips/11688/.

As you read this section, make notes under the following headings:

- WHO has the power to call an election?
- WHAT is the official procedure for calling an election?
- WHEN may elections be held?
- WHY may elections be called?

Elections in Canada are called for one of three reasons:

1. Generally, an election must be called every four years. Specifically the Canada Elections Act requires an election be called on the third Monday in October of the fourth year following polling day from the previous general election. (There are exceptions to the four-year rule, as you'll see next.)
2. The government decides at some point during its term of office that it needs to hold an election, usually because it believes the time is ripe to extend its current mandate or to improve its standing—the number of members—in Parliament.
3. The government is defeated on a matter of confidence—such as its budget—and an election is called to choose a new government.

In any of these cases, the prime minister meets with the governor general and asks him or her to dissolve the sitting Parliament and authorize a new election. In Canada, campaigns take place for a minimum of 36 days after the election is called (no maximum period is stated in the Elections Act).

Dissolution

It is the governor general, on the advice of the prime minister, who issues a proclamation declaring that Parliament is dissolved. The proclamation is published in the *Canada Gazette*, the official newspaper of the Government of Canada.

A second proclamation sets the date

for the election along with the names of the winning candidates. A third proclamation announces the date on which the new Parliament will meet.

Who Makes the Call

Although only the governor general has the authority to legally dissolve Parliament, in reality he or she may only do so on the advice of the prime minister. Further, according to convention under the parliamentary system followed by Canada, that advice is binding. In short, a prime minister can call an election whenever he or she feels it would be advantageous to do so. Why wait four years if the party is way ahead in the polls in year three? Of course, if the government loses the confidence of the House, it has no choice but to resign and face an election. Custom and convention permit no alternative.

The King-Byng Affair

Canada faced a genuine political crisis in 1926 when the Governor General, Lord Byng, refused to dissolve Parliament at the request of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. King held the post because his Liberal Party formed a coalition with the much smaller Progressive Party. Together they prevented the Conservatives from forming a minority government.

But one of King's associates was revealed to have taken bribes, and when King had him appointed to the Senate, the Progressives quickly withdrew

their support of the Liberals. Realizing he was likely to lose the confidence of the House, King went to Byng and asked him to dissolve Parliament. Byng refused. Instead, noting that the Conservatives actually had won a plurality in the election, Byng suggested that they should be given a chance to govern. When King resigned, Byng invited their leader, Arthur Meighen, to form a government. King was furious.

Meighen attempted to govern, but King led a successful campaign to bring down the new government in a

confidence vote in the House. Meighen was denied confidence by one vote. He was forced to ask Byng to dissolve Parliament. The Governor General did so, and King won a solid majority in the resulting election.

This was effectively the last time a governor general was able to deny an election writ to the prime minister of a sitting Parliament. Thanks to King's election victory, the convention has become that when the prime minister asks for an election his or her wish is granted.

For Discussion

While prime ministers effectively have the right to call an election whenever they wish, the question remains: should they have this right? Consider the example of the leader of a minority government who calls an election only because he or she feels that the party will be returned with a majority. Is this sufficient ground to dissolve Parliament for an expensive election? Would you like to see the PM's power modified? Why or why not?

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Election Preparation

Check It Out

The Conservative Party ads are available online at www.conservative.ca/multimedia/our_tv_ads/. The Liberal Party ads are at www.liberal.ca/newsroom/blog/.

Reading Prompt

As you read through this section, make note of the approaches the various parties have taken to prepare for a possible election and the approaches you feel are the most effective.

For the media it has been obvious: the feds are gearing up for an election. All the parties insist that they feel no need to go to the polls this spring, but most of them look like they're already running. All the parties have campaign plans well under way.

The Globe and Mail (January 18, 2011) provided a round-up of preparations by the various parties, two weeks before Parliament had even begun sitting.

- The Conservatives have election headquarters set up in Ottawa. They have an arrangement with Air Canada that will provide them with a campaign plane with about two weeks of notice. The party also has a new campaign manager: Guy Giorno, Prime Minister Harper's former chief of staff. They have unveiled a series of campaign-style advertisements. With one exception, these have been attack ads against leaders of opposition parties.
- Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has been busy on the road promoting the Liberal brand across the country. His appearances are campaign-style meetings outlining the party's response to the government's perceived failures and the Liberals' counter-proposals. The party has also been running ads that attack specific Conservative economic policies.
- The NDP has an arrangement with Air Canada to obtain a plane if and when an official campaign gets underway. They have also renovated their campaign headquarters at their Ottawa offices with extensive new technology.

- The Bloc Québécois has officially alerted its candidates to be ready for an election soon after the release of the budget in March.

The Ads

The Conservative Party's ads have generated considerable negative comment in the media, but are of a type that has been effective in past campaigns. Each leader of an opposition party is singled out for personal attack.

Under the slogan "Ignatieff, he didn't come back for you," the Conservatives accuse Michael Ignatieff of acting only in self-interest when he returned from Harvard to Canada to run for political office. Jack Layton of the NDP is accused of being driven by ambition to the point where he would do anything to gain power. As for Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe, he's "too Montreal" and ignores the real heartland of Quebec.

The Liberals are the only other party that has begun television advertising. They too have unveiled attack ads; but these are ads attacking policies, not personalities. Two specific decisions have come under fire. The first is the decision of the government to purchase F-35 stealth fighter jets without putting the contract out to tender. The second ad objects to the decision to proceed with corporate tax cuts when the cost of living keeps climbing.

The Conservatives actually had to pull one of their ads when it was condemned by politicians of all stripes. "In this 15-second spot, the Tories asked whether the Liberal Party was seeking an

‘unnecessary’ election. Then it showed a TV clip of Ignatieff enthusiastically declaring, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ The ‘yes’s,’ of course, were taken completely out of context. The Conservatives had used a cheap editing trick to seriously misrepresent the views of their opponent. In politics, that’s about as low as you can get” (Gerry Nichols, *Toronto Star*, February 11, 2011).

Neither the NDP nor the Bloc has begun running ads.

Party Positions

The Conservatives have positioned themselves as the party of fiscal responsibility, promising to prioritize job creation and debt reduction. They are also defining themselves as the only party that is really tough on crime. In an attempt to win a majority, the party has identified 45 seats where they feel the opposition is especially vulnerable and will target these with extra attention in the next election. Many of these are in the 905 and 416 areas in and around Toronto; others are in British Columbia; some are rural ridings whose sitting members recently voted against ending the long-gun registry. If the party were to hold its current seats and win 12 of the targeted ones it would have its majority.

The Liberals are saying that voters need to ask themselves some basic questions as they prepare to vote: “Are you, the Canadian family, better off than you were five years ago? Is the Canadian economy stronger than it was five years ago? Is Canada more respected in the

world than it was five years ago? Is our democracy stronger than it was five years ago?” (*The Globe and Mail*, January 14, 2011). The party is promising to reverse corporate tax cuts and abandon plans to buy F-35 fighters. They have released a Family Care Plan worth \$1-billion to assist families in caring for sick relatives. They are proposing investments in a number of other areas—clean energy technology, pension guarantees, early childhood and advanced education—although they have yet to announce funding details. The Liberals will also likely try to make foreign policy a major issue, pointing to the recent failure to obtain a United Nations Security Council seat as an indication of the weakness of the Conservative government in this area.

The NDP will focus on social issues: pension reform and guaranteed senior incomes, improved health services, and the removal of the GST on home heating bills. Other initiatives will focus on the environment and building a clean economy. The NDP will also emphasize their opposition to the extension of the military mission in Afghanistan, a position unique among the national parties.

The Bloc Québécois runs candidates only in Quebec and will argue that it alone serves as a real voice for the citizens of that province. Its platform will include demands for changes to the equalization formula, compensation for tax harmonization, and opposition to the Afghanistan mission extension.

For Discussion

1. Based on your reading and the video, how prepared do you feel each of the political parties is to face a general election? Do you feel this election preparedness makes it more likely that an election will be held this spring?
2. What happens to the parties’ election machines if a spring election is not called?
3. What effects do you think attack ads have on the relationship between parties as they conduct the day-to-day business of Parliament?

