

In 1926, voters showed us the way

DAVID BERCUSON

From Friday's Globe and Mail
December 4, 2008

The Liberal-NDP coalition's claim to legitimacy and a right to govern without an election ignores more than 140 years of political party role-playing in government and the affirmation of that role by Canadians themselves in the 1926 federal election.

Stéphane Dion, Jack Layton and coalition supporters rest their claim on the fact that the Conservatives obtained just 38 per cent of the vote in the Oct. 14 election. They say that, in our British-originated parliamentary system, MPs have a perfect right to withdraw their support from a prime minister, overturn that prime minister's government, and form a new one. They are technically correct, but their assertion ignores the key role that parties have played in Canadian politics.

Political parties are absent from our Constitution. Indeed, until the 1960s, party names were not even written on the ballot. There was, in effect, a pretense - legally based, to be sure - that the electorate voted for individuals, not parties. That the individuals happened to affiliate themselves with other like-minded individuals, hold conventions, choose leaders and support first ministers of a particular political stripe, so be it.

And yet parties shaped Confederation itself and formed and defeated governments throughout Canadian history. What happened on Oct. 14 was that a plurality of Canadians (38 per cent) selected the Conservatives from among four major parties to run the nation. What does this mean? Simply this: that four parties now recognized in law - though still not in the Constitution - vied for office. Each of these parties is a legal entity for the purposes of nominating candidates, collecting donations, buying time on radio and TV and - most important - putting party labels on ballots for those individuals running for Parliament.

This means that, in the real world of Canadian politics, parties matter a whole lot. And they always have.

The Great Coalition that every Canadian child is supposed to know about - the coming together of George Brown's Clear Grits and John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier's Liberal-Conservatives in June of 1864 - initiated the Confederation project. And it emerged after years of legislative deadlock in the united Province of Canada. The Great Coalition, in fact, was the third government in seven months. Ever since, of course, Canadian politics has been the story of parties vying for power - not the story of individual members floating in space, coalescing or separating on each issue that comes before the House of Commons.

Thus, enjoying "the confidence of the House" is no abstract situation. In real life, voters vote for parties as much as, or even more than, they vote for MPs, and they expect those parties to stand for something and to conduct themselves accordingly.

The current impasse in Ottawa is clearly about the alignment of parties against each other, not the shifting of loyalties by 308 individual "loose fish," as Macdonald called them. The issue of what the House consists of - loose fish or political parties - was decided by Canadian voters in 1926.

In the face of political scandal after the 1925 election, Mackenzie King, leader of a Liberal minority government, asked the governor-general, Lord Byng, to dissolve Parliament and call another election. Byng refused, and asked Arthur Meighen to form a Conservative government.

Meighen was quickly defeated in the House and in the election that followed. Canadians, in effect, told the governor-general that the prime minister - the leader of the governing party, minority or not - had the right to an election if he so desired.

To put it another way, when voters select a governing party, they ought to expect that party to govern and, if it can't, to return to them for another mandate. Michaëlle Jean has now followed the precedent set by the voters in 1926, and was right to do so.

David Bercuson is professor of history at the University of Calgary.