

## Minority government becoming the new normal in Canada

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OTTAWA - Pining for the good old days of majority federal governments? Don't hold your breath. Minorities governments may be the new normal in Canada.

Barring the unexpected- such as the collapse of the Bloc Quebecois or the emergence of a charismatic leader capable of capturing voters of all political stripes- minority governments could become a near-permanent fixture in a country so fractured by ideological, regional, rural-urban and ethnic divides.

Pollster Nikita Nanos says Canadians are going to get a taste of what life was like for Phil, the scrooge-like weather forecaster played by Bill Murray in the hit movie Groundhog Day.

"We're waking up every morning and it's still a minority," says Nanos, president of SES Research.

Although he and other analysts don't rule out a return to majority government in the next election, they say the political landscape is virtually devoid of the conditions needed for that to happen- something that apparently has not escaped the notice of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Harper, who has made no secret of his desire to lead a majority government, has insisted for months he has no interest in hitting the campaign trail any time soon.

With credible polls consistently showing the Conservatives stuck in minority territory, Harper's political foes and the pundits are finally starting to believe him.

Moreover, analysts say, there is little on the horizon that suggests either of the two major parties- Conservative or Liberal- could achieve a majority, possibly for years.

"Barring a collapse by the Bloc, I think the best prediction is that we will have minority governments for some time to come," says Jon Pammatt, a political scientist and co-editor of a series of books about recent federal elections, written by professors at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Pammatt says the united Conservative party's newfound competitiveness in Ontario and possibly in Quebec erases the advantage that allowed the Liberals' Jean Chretien to waltz over the divided political right to win three back-to-back majority governments.

Pollster Darrell Bricker says attaining a majority of parliamentary seats in the current fractured environment is "a bridge too far" for both the Tories and the Grits.

"The divided right doesn't exist anymore, so Ontario will always be a bit of a dogfight now," says Bricker, president of Ipsos Reid. "If Ontario is a dogfight and the BQ is still in national politics ... it is virtually impossible to form a majority."

So, who cares? Mostly political parties that prefer to lead majority governments, as well as some political scientists and pundits who prefer two parties over the current "pizza" Parliament, with four mainstream parties and the Green party in the wings.

Bob Plamondon, author of the book *Full Circle, Death and Resurrection in Canadian Conservative Politics*, admits he longs for a two-party system.

"My hope and long-term prediction is that if we end up with a string of minority governments and, if the winner of those minority Parliaments is consistently Conservative, it's inevitable that the parties on the left will unite," says Plamondon, a Conservative partisan.

Bricker dismisses the prospect, and says the "stew" of Canadian politics does not lend itself to a two-party system.

He says parties should focus on forming a government, and not fixate on winning a majority.

Analysts say that as long as there are not elections every few months most voters don't appear unhappy with their second consecutive minority government- the Liberal government of Paul Martin in June 2004 and Harper's Tories since January 2006.

"Canadians do not see minority governments as a tragedy," said Bricker.

The last time there were two minorities in a row was when Lester Pearson led the Liberals to narrow victories in 1963 and 1965. These governments were by no means lame: the cornerstones of Canada's social welfare system, including the Canada Pension Plan and universal medical insurance, were laid during those years.

Pammett says the emergence of the charismatic Pierre Trudeau combined with a certain degree of fatigue with minority government to propel the Liberals to a sweeping majority in 1968.

Bricker says a charismatic leader now would torpedo his prediction of repeated minority governments.

"But, given the current crop of people we have on the stage, it isn't going to happen," he adds. In addition to Harper, today's leaders are Stephane Dion for the Liberals, Jack Layton for the NDP and the BQ's Gilles Duceppe.

Nanos agrees. "Is there such a word as charismatically challenged? I think that would speak to both the Conservative and the Liberal leaders right now."

Nanos said Trudeau, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chretien were the only leaders in recent memory whose appeal could overcome the country's divisions- the kind of charisma needed to win more than a single majority government.

Proponents of electoral reform say they hope successive minority governments, which they note require co-operation and compromise to succeed, will whet Canadians' appetite for adding some form of proportional representation to the current first-past-the-post system.

"If we're going to have minority government, let's have fairly elected minority government," says Larry Gordon, executive director of Fair Vote Canada.

Conservative Senator Hugh Segal, a longtime advocate of proportional representation, says voter volatility in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia keeps alive the prospect of either the Tories or the Liberals pulling off a majority in the next election.

Neither party would, however, be wise to hit the campaign trail in search of a majority, he adds.

"It's very hard to go ask for a majority because people see that as asking for total control of the system," he said, "And Canadians are pretty prudent about that. They are not unhappy with minority government."

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