



# Parliamentary Bookshelf

## Challenges of Minority Governments in Canada by Marc Gervais, Invenire Books, Ottawa, 2012.

Canadian academic literature on minority government is sparse considering there have been nine such instances at the federal level since 1957 and many more in the provinces. Peter Russell (*Two Cheers for Minority Government, 2008*) painted a rosy picture of possible benefits while others have taken a more critical view in light of recent experience.

This book, based in large part on a 2011 doctoral dissertation, takes a different approach. After reviewing the literature and discussing the theory of minority government it compares in detail four specific minority parliaments; Diefenbaker (1957-58), Pearson (1963-65), Clark (1979-80) and the first Harper minority (2006-2008) with a view to how successful they have been at maintaining power and controlling the legislative agenda. He measures such things as the duration of Parliaments (Pearson's first sat for 418 days; Clark's for only 49) and legislative output (Diefenbaker managed to get 90% of his bills passed in 1957-58; Clark only 21%).

The examples represent four different types of minority government: short duration/high output (Diefenbaker); long duration/high output (Pearson); short duration/low output (Clark) and long duration/low output (Harper).

Individual chapters on each case provide a concise summary of politics during that time with particular emphasis on the role of parliamentary procedural

and political strategy. For example the very productive Diefenbaker minority benefitted from a weak opposition with a decimated Liberal Party and a soon to be defunct CCF. Evident public support which eventually manifested itself in the overwhelming majority of 1958, ensured the minority government was able to implement its agenda.

The first Pearson minority also faced a weak opposition under a discredited Mr. Diefenbaker and a Social Credit Party divided into two separate groups one of which, the Creditistes, were inclined to keep the Liberals in power. Mr. Pearson's willingness to compromise and the NDP's support for some major social changes gave the Liberals enough votes to survive gruelling Throne Speech debates, budget bills, and a heavy legislative program.

The Clark minority appeared to have some advantages (a leaderless opposition) but an unwillingness to compromise on major policy initiatives and failure to work with smaller parties led to its early demise.

The first Harper minority began with its chief rival weakened by the sponsorship scandal. The seat distribution was favourable to the Conservatives as support from a single opposition party was all the government needed and no combination of two opposition parties had enough votes bring down the Conservatives. Using a variety of parliamentary manoeuvres the Conservatives managed to prevail through three Throne Speech Debates

and three Budgets. But when their legislative projects became bogged down in committee the Prime Minister dissolved Parliament despite having just enacted legislation fixing the date for elections.

It is unfortunate that for reasons of time and space not every minority parliament was examined. A survey of the Martin minority, for example, would have shown that many troubling aspects of the Harper approach really began under Mr. Martin.

One question left unanswered by the book is whether recent minority governments are significantly different than earlier ones in the way they deal with important parliamentary conventions. Is it now *de rigueur* for minority governments to play fast and loose with the rules, to hang onto power by any means be it enticing members to cross the floor in exchange for cabinet posts, ignoring votes of non confidence, prorogating to avoid defeat, or defining accountability so that it never seems to include resignation?

The author is careful not to pronounce directly on whether previous minority governments were more respectful of the unwritten rules of Westminster style government but attentive readers will draw their own conclusions.

Gary Levy

Editor