

# The sound of one democratic hand clapping

## *Coalition government, yes, but it's not the one we deserve*

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After 141 years is Canada finally, albeit accidentally, on the path to modern representative democracy? Don't pop the champagne cork yet. We still have a way to go, but the law of unintended consequences may be at work in Ottawa.

The drama began on November 28 when Jack and Gilles went up the Hill. They joined Stephane Dion to announce the historic Liberal – NDP coalition agreement, along with support from the Bloc. The three-party partnership is now poised to give Canadians an experience rarer than a Leafs' Stanley Cup victory parade: true majority rule.

Similar to voters in most advanced nations, Canadians seldom give majority support to any single party, doing so only four times since World War One and only once in the last half-century. But thanks to our antiquated first-past-the-post voting system, Canadians are generally ruled by phony majority governments. Typically, a party will get 40 to 45 percent of the votes, but win 50 to 60 percent of the seats, which gives them 100 per cent of the power to set the Parliamentary agenda.

At the recent Liberal-NDP-Bloc press conference announcing their parliamentary partnership, the three party leaders correctly claimed to represent the majority of voters, thus having a more legitimate right to govern than Stephen Harper.

The emotional reaction across the country by both supporters and opponents of the coalition would baffle people in most democracies. Several parties collectively representing the majority of voters, announcing they would govern on a platform of their common policies? That's called business-as-usual in modern democracies.

But the coalition we got is not the coalition we deserved.

If voters had used a fair and proportional voting system in the recent election and cast votes the same way, a different coalition would have emerged because the seats held by each party would have reflected their portion of the popular vote. The following scenario is based on a projection showing a fair allocation of seats.

We would most likely have had a true majority coalition with three parties, rather than the current two-party minority coalition propped up by the Bloc. The coalition would have been more politically cohesive, with stronger representation from all regions.

The three people sitting at the front of the room at the recent coalition press conference would have been the Liberal leader representing an 81-member Liberal caucus, the NDP leader representing a 57-member NDP caucus and the Green Party leader representing a 23-member caucus. Assuming a proportionate assignment of portfolios, the resulting coalition cabinet might have been 13 Liberals, 8 NDP and 4 Greens.

The regional composition of the coalition would have been dramatically different. The coalition would have boasted about 43 MPs in the west, rather than just 21, and in Quebec 30 MPs rather than 14.

What about Mr. Duceppe? He would have been sitting on the opposition benches with just 28 Bloc MPs, rather than the 49 he has today that give him the power to pull the plug on a federal government.

A fair voting system would also have provided a more stable and effective government.

The expiry date on the current coalition is three years at best and more likely less than two years. Because first-past-the-post voting allows a relatively small shift in support to produce a windfall of seats for one party or another, the current system subverts stable and effective government.

With fair and proportional voting systems, parties get the seats they deserve, no more or no less. Their fortunes rise or fall depending on their ability to form stable and effective partnerships with other parties. Elections tend to come every three or four years and government policies more closely reflect majority view because government actually represents the majority.

Today the parties' spin-meisters are working hard to divide voters into warring camps and pit entire regions against one another. When careers in Ottawa are on the line, country be damned.

Will Canadians turn on one another rather than the real culprits? Or are we finally fed up with this madness and the old-guard party leaders who defend an electoral system that serves their own interests but not those of the voters?

Now is the time, more than ever, for Liberal, Conservative, NDP and Green voters to stand together – call it a people's coalition – to demand equal and effective votes for all and legitimate majority rule for Canada. Grassroots Canadians should unleash a storm of protest until all federal party leaders agree to convene an historic national citizens' assembly on electoral reform – an independent body of several hundred voters, outside of any party's control – to study and then propose the best fair and proportional voting system for Canada.

If we form that people's coalition, we just might be able to put Canada on the path to real representative democracy. If we fail to do so, then political turmoil, bitter regional animosities, and failed governments will likely become the norm and the future of Canada itself will be at stake.

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