

When the House is rockin', don't come a-knockin'

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ABSTRACT

Harper stoked the campaign fires last week... complaining that the House of Commons has become "dysfunctional" and warning that he will "have to make a judgment in the next little while as to whether or not this Parliament can function productively." The remark was widely interpreted as a hint that Harper, rather than awaiting eventual defeat at the hands of opposition forces, could seize the initiative by going to the Governor General and demanding an election. - **In those situations, the governor general remains the constitutional "fire extinguisher," to prevent abuse of our democratic traditions.** -

FULL TEXT

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-Knock, knock? Your Excellency?

-Ah, Mr. Harper. Bienvenu. But I thought you weren't coming around 'til 11?

-Yes, well, there's been a change of plans.

- No kidding.

-What's that?

- Nothing... So, I guess I don't need to ask why you've come to see me?

-No.

- Correct me if I'm wrong, but did I not sign a bill of yours barely 16 months ago directing that elections be held on a fixed schedule? Third Monday in October, as I recall. In the fourth year after the last election. What are you doing asking me to dissolve Parliament a year ahead of time?

-Yes, but if you remember, it also said that nothing in it affected the power to dissolve Parliament "at the Governor

General's discretion." Meaning at my discretion. If it please Your Excellency.

- I am aware that convention requires me to act on the advice of my First Minister. What I want to know is, which First Minister? I thought you were all for putting government and opposition on, how you say, the level playing field?

-That was before.

-Before...?

-Before this House of Commons became so dysfunctional. It's my judgment that this Parliament can no longer function productively.

- I see. And what is your evidence that Parliament has ceased to function?

-My what?

-Your evidence, Mr. Harper. If I am obliged to act on your advice, you are surely obliged to give me some.

-Well, gosh, they haven't passed any legislation in, I don't know, months.

-Parliament isn't in session. It's summer.

-Yes, but look at what's going on in those committees. They're a complete circus!

-As I understand it, that's because your own hand-picked chairmen, whenever they don't like where the discussion is headed, get up and leave. Your party has allegedly coached witnesses not to appear before the ethics committee. Mon dieu, you even issued your people a 200-page manual on how to disrupt committee business.

-With respect, Your Excellency, that's my prerogative.

-So it is. But if the committees are in disarray, it would seem within your power to put them right. Without an election.

- But we're not getting anything done! I can't get my agenda enacted.

- You've passed 29 bills in the last year alone: crime, tax cuts, you name it. Why, the other day you were even boasting about it: a "strong record of achievement," you called it. And I don't recall any of your bills being defeated in that time.

-Yes, but what about all the bills that are stuck on the order paper, held up by opposition obstructionism!

- Such as?

-Bill C-6, the "veiled voter" bill. Bill C-4, an act to amend the Pilotage Act. An act to amend the Canada Grain Act. An act respecting family homes situated on First Nation reserves. You know, mandate stuff.

- Doesn't seem all that énorme to me. Besides, how would an election change anything? The polls are deadlocked, more or less where they've been since the last election. You yourself have said, and I quote, "the next election in all likelihood would be a minority, one way or the other."

-I wish you wouldn't keep throwing these statements in my face. Just because I say a thing, that's no reason to assume it has to mean something.

-I'll bear that in mind. Meantime, I have certain constitutional responsibilities to uphold. Ordinarily, my duty is to follow whatever instructions my prime minister gives me.

- "The Queen would have to sign her own death warrant." Ha, ha. Er, Bagehot. You know.

-Bien sûr. But there are exceptions: for example, where the issue is who is to be the prime minister-where it's unclear who has the confidence of the House. In those situations, the governor general remains the constitutional "fire extinguisher," to prevent abuse of our democratic traditions.

-You're not serious?

-You say you're being prevented from governing, but you haven't provided me with a soupçon of evidence. If I give you a dissolution now, it makes a mockery not only of Parliament, but of your own legislation. If you're not interested in governing, perhaps I should ask Mr. Dion to give it a try, and spare the country the expense and uncertainty of another pointless election-the fifth in 11 years. I have precedent on my side. And, need I add, much of the media.

-Or we could forget we had this conversation.

-Si tu veux. Good day, Mr. Harper.

'But the bill says Parliament can be dissolved at your discretion, meaning at my discretion'

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ON THE WEB: For more Andrew Coyne, visit his blog at www.macleans.ca/andrewcoyne

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