

# PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

## Introduction



Download the mp3 of this Introduction at [newsinreview.cbclearning.ca](http://newsinreview.cbclearning.ca).

### Focus

This *News in Review* story explores the tenuous situation in the House of Commons in the fall of 2009. In September, the Liberal leader announced that his party would no longer support Stephen Harper's Conservative government. Because the Conservatives have only a minority government, they need the support of at least one other party to stay in power. To date, it had been the Liberals, but in the fall of 2009, that was changing.

As Parliament resumed its session in September 2009, Canada appeared to be poised on the brink of yet another federal election—the fourth in just over five years. The minority government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper was facing defeat if all three opposition parties—the Liberals, Bloc Québécois, and New Democrats—joined forces to bring it down in a no-confidence vote. For his part, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff had pledged to do just that, signaling his party's dissatisfaction with what he claimed was the government's underfunding of the Employment Insurance program as the reason. Ignatieff's decision was a bold one, given that opinion polls showed a steady decline in his party's popularity and the possibility that if a new election were called, Harper's Conservatives might finally win a majority.

But expectations of another federal election in the fall of 2009 were quickly dispelled when NDP Leader Jack Layton decided to vote with the Conservatives after they promised to inject more money into the Employment Insurance (EI) program. Layton argued that these funds were necessary to provide greater assistance to the growing number of Canadians who were losing their jobs as a result of the continuing economic recession. As the leader of the party that claims to represent “ordinary working Canadians,” Layton sought to take credit for forcing Harper to improve EI funding in return for his support in Parliament.

Two no-confidence motions were held in the House of Commons in September and early October—both of them introduced by Ignatieff's Liberal Party. Although his party and the Bloc Québécois joined forces to vote against the government, the motions failed when the NDP voted with the Conservatives. But the NDP's leader, Jack Layton, made it clear that his party's support was conditional and should not be viewed as a “blank cheque” for the Conservatives. Layton faced criticism from some quarters for his party's decision to prop up the Conservatives, but he argued that making sure that out-of-work Canadians and their families received their monthly EI cheques was his party's priority at the moment.

But one issue soon emerged as a possible weapon for the Liberals to use against the Conservatives if an election was called. Ignatieff, and other prominent Liberal members of Parliament (MPs), were critical of some government members for displaying their political party logo on cheques issued to their local ridings as part of the federal economic stimulus program. The Liberals claimed that this was a gross and partisan abuse of power and called for the federal ethics commissioner to investigate. But as winter approached and the likelihood of another election appeared to be receding, at least for a few months, the Conservatives could take comfort in the fact that a slew of opinion polls indicated that support for their party, and its once-uninspiring leader, was rising.

### To Consider

1. Why might Canadians be unenthusiastic about yet another federal election being called for the fall of 2009?
2. Do you think it is likely that the Conservatives will be able to win a majority in the next federal election? Why or why not?

# PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

## Video Review

### Quote

“How do I explain to these people that I keep letting this government go on and that is why in my hearts of hearts, after much reflection, we’ve decided as a party that we can’t continue to give the government confidence in the House of Commons.”  
— Michael Ignatieff, Liberal leader, explaining why he wanted to force the government into an election (www.cbc.ca, October 1, 2009)

### Pre-viewing Activity

Before watching the video, discuss the following questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. What is the difference between a majority and a minority government?  
What kind of government does Canada have now?  

---

---
2. What issues do you think are likely to be important to Canadians when the next federal election is held?  

---

---
3. How would you evaluate the performance of the following federal political leaders:
  - a) Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper  

---
  - b) Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff  

---
  - c) NDP Leader Jack Layton  

---
4. If a federal election were held now, which party do you think would win? Would it be a majority or a minority government? Give reasons for your answer.  

---

---
5. Do you think Canadians are in the mood for another federal election so soon after the last one, in October 2008? What gives you this impression?  

---

---

---

### Quote

"I think it would be irresponsible to throw the country into an election at a time when we have the possibility of getting a billion dollars more for the tens of thousands of families just in the next couple of weeks."  
— Jack Layton, NDP leader, speaking to CBC News on October 1, 2009, about the government's plan to extend Employment Insurance benefits

## Viewing Questions

Watch the video and answer the following questions.

1. Name the four political parties that hold seats in the federal Parliament and their leaders.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What issues did the Liberals give as reasons for wanting to defeat the Conservative government in a no-confidence vote?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why did the NDP decide to support the government and thus prevent another election?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What popular new policy were Canadians worried might not be passed in Parliament if a new election were called?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Why was the NDP's decision to support the government a change in policy on their part?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. According to opinion polls, which party seemed most likely to win if a new election was called?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What did Stephen Harper do to attract favourable attention from the public?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What scandal emerged to give the opposition parties ammunition to use against the government?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Why did a federal election appear less likely at the end of October 2009 than it had just a month or two before?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Why might the government hope it is defeated in a no-confidence vote in Parliament?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Post-viewing Activities

After you have watched the video, discuss and respond to the following questions. Your teacher may choose to place you in a small group with other students.

1. Based on what you have seen in the video, which federal political leader do you think emerged most positively from the debate over whether or not there should be another federal election—Stephen Harper, Michael Ignatieff, or Jack Layton? Explain the reasons for your choice.

---

---

2. Do you think it is appropriate for government MPs to use their political party logo on cheques issued to their ridings as part of the Economic Action Plan? Why or why not?

---

---

3. Why do you think Stephen Harper's appearance playing the piano and singing a Beatles tune received such favourable attention? Do you think it should have done? Why or why not?

---

---

4. Why do you think the Liberals under Michael Ignatieff have seen their lead over the Conservatives in opinion polls vanish from the summer to the fall of 2009?

---

---

# PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

## *Minority Government in Operation*

### **Did you know . . .**

In 1925, Mackenzie King's minority Liberal government agreed to implement old age pension legislation to keep the support of Progressive and Labour party MPs. The legislation was implemented in 1927 and is still in place today.

Since the federal election of 2004, Canada has experienced three minority governments: one led by the Liberals and two by the Conservatives. It is possible that the next federal election may result

in yet another minority government. Here is some background information on minority governments in Canada and the advantages and disadvantages of this type of government.

### **Reading Prompt**

As you read the following information, ask yourself whether or not it matters if the next election ends in another minority government.

#### *What is a minority government?*

In Canada's parliamentary system there are two possible types of governments: a majority and a minority. When a political party wins a clear majority of seats in a federal election, it is able to form a majority government since the number of seats it holds is greater than that of all the other political parties combined. Currently, there are 308 seats in the Canadian Parliament—so a party needs to win 155 to attain a majority.

However, in the October 2008 federal election, the Conservatives won just 143 seats, 12 seats short of the magic number needed to form a majority. Thus, Prime Minister Stephen Harper formed his second minority government, because the total number of seats won by the other three parties—the Liberals, Bloc Québécois, and NDP—exceeded that of the Conservatives. This means that the Conservative government could be defeated on a vote of non-confidence in Parliament at any time, should the three opposition parties agree to vote together to topple it.

Normally, majority governments can expect to be in power for four to five years before facing another election. But a minority government is not so lucky because it relies on the support of the other parties. This has been the case recently, as Canada had held three

federal elections from 2004 to 2009, with each one resulting in a minority government.

#### *Are minority governments common?*

For many decades after Confederation in 1867, Canadian politics was basically a two-party system dominated by the Liberals and Conservatives. Since they were the only important parties competing in federal elections, one of them always won a majority government. However, beginning in the 1920s, a number of smaller, regionally based political parties emerged, marking the beginning of the multi-party system Canada has today.

The federal election of 1921 was the first to result in a minority government, when the new Progressive Party, with considerable strength in the West, came in second behind the Liberals and ahead of the Conservatives. Minority governments also became more prevalent during the 1960s with the rise of the New Democratic Party and other smaller parties. More recently, minority governments have been common because there are four important political parties competing for votes in Canada. Three of them—the Conservatives, Liberals, and NDP—are national parties running candidates across the country. The other one—the Bloc Québécois—only contests

### Quote

"An election is a little like going to the dentist: You don't look forward to it, but it's something you have to go through."

— Perrin Beatty, president and CEO of the Ottawa-based organization Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters (*Business Edge* magazine, May 26, 2005)

seats in Quebec and is a major party in that province. The Bloc's stranglehold on many seats in Quebec makes it difficult for either the Liberals or Conservatives to win enough support in that province to form a majority government.

#### *How does a minority government stay in power?*

There are different tactics a minority government can employ to ensure it has enough support in Parliament to stay in power. For example, it can make compromises on some of its policies that will encourage one of the opposition parties to support it in return for achieving one of its political goals. This happened in 2005, when the then-Liberal government of Paul Martin made changes in the federal budget that were demanded by the NDP in order to hold off defeat in a no-confidence vote. More recently, Stephen Harper's Conservatives were able to turn back a Liberal no-confidence vote after the NDP agreed to support it in return for increased funding for the Employment Insurance (EI) program, a measure it had long been advocating.

Another way for a minority government to hold on to power is to enter into a formal or informal agreement with one of the opposition parties. This occurred during the Liberal minority government of Pierre Trudeau from 1972 to 1974. At this time, the NDP agreed to support the Liberals in return for the introduction of measures to protect Canadian industry from foreign competition.

#### *How does a coalition government differ from a minority government?*

A coalition government consists of two or more parties joining together to govern the country. This usually means sharing positions in the Cabinet

and co-operating on policies that all parts of the coalition support. Coalitions are very rare in Canada but are common in Western European countries whose electoral systems make minority governments almost a regular occurrence.

There was a brief suggestion of a coalition government consisting of the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Québécois in late 2008. Many Canadians were opposed to the idea of a coalition since they believed it was undemocratic—that is, the Canadian public did not elect a coalition government, it elected the Conservative government. However, there is nothing in the Canadian Constitution or traditions of parliamentary procedure to prevent a coalition from being formed if it can command enough support in the House of Commons to hold a majority of seats.

#### *What are the advantages and disadvantages of minority governments?*

Minority governments are not generally viewed as positive developments. This is because they make it difficult for a government to stay in power for very long, creating a climate of political instability and increased likelihood of frequent elections. Since a minority government has to gain the support of at least one opposition party in order to stay in power, it will probably need to compromise on some of its policies and make concessions to a smaller party that may have no realistic chance of ever forming the government on its own. Internationally, it may be difficult for a minority government to gain much confidence from foreign leaders, who may view it as a temporary and unpredictable partner.

However, some political analysts argue that there are definite advantages to minority governments. For example, a minority government must take the

views of other parties into account when framing its policies and is also required to be more accountable to them for its actions. Such a government will have to operate with transparency in pursuing its goals by informing the other parties of its intentions and not trying to conceal them. Majority governments do not have to concern themselves with such issues and thus may have the temptation

to operate in a high-handed, aloof, and arrogant manner—almost as “elected dictatorships.”

Source: Information in this feature adapted from: “Minority governments in Canada,” [www.mapleleafweb.com/print/111](http://www.mapleleafweb.com/print/111); “When the majority doesn’t rule,” CBC News In Depth, [www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/11/14/f-minority-government.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/11/14/f-minority-government.html)

## Activities

Reflect on what you read in this feature and by yourself or with a partner respond to the following questions.

1. Why have minority governments become more common in Canada since 2004?
2. What challenges does a minority government situation pose to the leaders of the government and opposition parties in Parliament?
3. Do you agree that coalition governments are “undemocratic?” Why or why not?
4. Do you think minority governments pose more advantages or disadvantages for Canada’s political system? Why?

Be prepared to share your responses with your classmates.

# PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

## *Harper and Ignatieff: A Tale of Two Leaders*

### **Did you know . . .**

In 2004, Stephen Harper was so discouraged by his party's defeat in the federal election that he contemplated resigning.

### **Did you know . . .**

Stephen Harper gained praise for spearheading the decision to extend a full apology to Aboriginal Canadians for the decades of suffering they endured in government-run residential schools in June 2008. Some Canadians began to soften their opinion of Harper after he gave the public apology.

In the run-up to yet another federal election, Canadians were taking stock of the current prime minister, Stephen Harper, and the leader of the official opposition, Michael Ignatieff.

In determining who will be the best leader, voters often examine a number of factors: intelligence, common sense, experience, warmth, and communication skills.

### **Reading Aid**

Create a two-column chart in your notes with "Stephen Harper" on one side and "Michael Ignatieff" on the other. As you read the following information, record details about their strengths, weaknesses, and the challenges they face as they prepare to face off during an election in 2010.

### **Stephen Harper**

Since assuming the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2002, Stephen Harper has fought three elections, losing one and winning two. However the goal of securing a majority government has so far eluded his grasp. Harper used to be a Reform Party MP from Alberta and head of the National Citizens' Coalition, an ultra-conservative lobby group. He was a staunch defender of his right-wing, conservative beliefs. But over the last few years he has broadened his perspective and now presents himself as the leader of a truly national party seeking to establish itself in all regions of the country. Harper has grown into a confident, self-assured leader who may be able to turn the growing national support he enjoys into a majority government when the next federal election is held.

To this end, he has become fluent in French and has reached out to moderate and conservative nationalists in Quebec. These efforts paid modest dividends in the October 2008 federal election when the Conservatives made a small breakthrough in the province. Under Harper, the Conservatives have also sought the backing of ethno-cultural groups that have traditionally been Liberal supporters. They have gained votes among the small but influential

Jewish community, particularly in Toronto, as a result of their strong endorsement for Israel in the United Nations and elsewhere. And they have also sought to build bridges to other groups such as the Sikhs, who are a significant voting bloc in some currently Liberal-held ridings in the Greater Toronto Area. They have built these relationships by stressing the party's socially conservative positions on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and pornography, which resonate with these group's traditional religious principles.

### **A "New and Improved" Harper?**

Many Canadians feel that over the past few years, Stephen Harper has been "rebranded" and has emerged as a competent, intelligent, and capable political leader. He is still criticized for lacking warmth and personal charm, but many people do not feel those are the most important qualities in a leader. However, others continue to harbour the suspicion that if he ever leads the Conservatives to a majority victory he will unleash a host of socially conservative right-wing policies. Harper continues to try to dispel these suspicions by indicating his willingness to abandon strict conservative positions on issues such as government spending and deficits through his Economic Action Plan—the



**Quote**

"Ever since I entered Parliament in January, people have been asking me: Why have you gone into politics? As in: 'Are you nuts?' No, I'm not nuts. This is my country, after all." — Michael Ignatieff, in a speech given at the University of Ottawa, March 30, 2006

stimulus package that is designed to help bring Canada out of the recession.

In October 2009, Harper made a surprise appearance playing the piano and singing the Beatles' hit "With a Little Help from my Friends" at a concert at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, accompanied by world-renowned cellist Yo Yo Ma. This performance, which attracted huge attention on YouTube and elsewhere, helped to "humanize" Stephen Harper in the eyes of many Canadians. Although his opponents continued to claim that this rebranding of the Conservative leader was a cynical, orchestrated political ploy on the part of Harper's handlers, there were growing signs that more Canadians were reassessing their views of the Prime Minister and accepting, or even embracing, the likelihood that he might be holding the office for some time to come.

**Michael Ignatieff**

Before entering federal politics as a Liberal MP and later party leader, Michael Ignatieff was an internationally known academic, author, and broadcaster whose perspective on world issues was avidly sought in influential policy-making circles in Washington, London, and New York. Returning to Canada after a long absence, he was approached by an influential group of Liberals who were looking for a new leader, someone whose intelligence, charisma, and charm might recapture the party's glory days under its legendary leader Pierre E. Trudeau. A safe Liberal seat in Toronto was found for him, and he was easily elected to Parliament in the January 2006 election, which saw the Liberals under Paul Martin defeated by Stephen Harper's Conservatives. This meant that Ignatieff would not immediately be named to a cabinet position but instead would have to spend his parliamentary apprenticeship as an opposition MP.

Later that year, after Paul Martin

stepped down as leader of the party, Ignatieff ran for the Liberal party leadership, facing off against opponents such as Bob Rae and Stéphane Dion. Ignatieff and Rae were old university friends, and both of them had considerable support among Liberals who were looking for a fresh new face to lead the party. But at the leadership convention in December 2006, party delegates decided that electing either Rae or Ignatieff was too great a risk to take.

Rae was viewed as having too much "baggage" from his unpopular five-year tenure as Ontario's NDP premier during the recession of the early 1990s and was also regarded as a relative newcomer to the Liberal Party. For his part, Ignatieff was discounted as someone lacking in Canadian political experience. And he was criticized for his controversial support of the Iraq war and the limited use of torture in interrogating suspected terrorists. In the end, after a close three-way race, the party chose Stéphane Dion, a former cabinet minister in the Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin governments, as the safe, experienced, compromise candidate.

**Taking Over as Leader**

Dion wasn't leader for long, however. After leading the Liberals to a very poor showing in the October 2008 federal election, he was accused of botching coalition efforts with the NDP and the Bloc Québécois. Shortly thereafter, Dion was forced to step down from the leadership. At this point, the only serious contenders for the Liberal party leadership were Rae and Ignatieff. It looked like there was more public support for Ignatieff, so the party put pressure on Rae to withdraw from the competition.

At first, there was great excitement among Liberals that their new leader would make a strong showing against Stephen Harper, especially since the

Conservatives were struggling to respond to the deepening economic recession that hit Canada and other Western countries in the fall of 2008. But Ignatieff decided to keep a low profile throughout much of 2009 because he believed that Stephen Harper's Conservatives would self-destruct. But this proved to be a mistake since it prevented Canadians from becoming more familiar with him. At the same time, the Conservatives unleashed a torrent of harsh, U.S.-election-style attack ads mocking Ignatieff for his intellectual pretensions and condescending attitude toward his home country.

These attacks proved effective, creating a negative impression of Ignatieff in the minds of many Canadians, and by the fall of 2009 the once media-savvy Liberal leader was increasingly being portrayed as inept, indecisive, and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary Canadians. His decision to force the Conservatives into an election at the earliest opportunity was viewed as an act of political desperation rather than as a bold move to assert his own readiness to govern. To make matters even worse, his clash with Denis Coderre—the head of the Liberals' Quebec caucus—over a nomination battle in Montreal and Coderre's subsequent resignation cast serious doubts on Ignatieff's ability to maintain

party unity—especially in a province that would be crucial to any chances the Liberals might have of forming the next federal government.

The jury remains out on Michael Ignatieff, and many Liberal insiders insist that he still has the opportunity to turn public opinion in his favour before the anticipated showdown with Harper at the polls sometime in 2010. But the dominant view is that time is running out for the Liberal leader and that he may need to rebrand himself—as Harper has apparently succeeded in doing—if he is to erase the large gap between the Liberals and the Conservatives in the opinion polls and establish himself as a credible choice for prime minister in the minds of Canadian voters.

Source: Information in this feature adapted from: "The battle for Brampton," by John Friesen, *The Globe and Mail*, October 23, 2009, [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/toronto/the-battle-for-brampton/article/1336](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/toronto/the-battle-for-brampton/article/1336); "The return of the native," by Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2009; "It's deep breath time for Liberals," by Greg Fergus, *The Globe and Mail*, October 6, 2009; "The liability of being liked," by Judith Timson, *The Globe and Mail*, October 11, 2009; "Narcissieff and the mirror of politics," by Rick Salutin, *The Globe and Mail*, September 25, 2009.

## Activities

1. Compare your chart with that of another student, or a small group of students. Did you record the same strengths and weaknesses, or did you see the two men's strengths and weaknesses differently? Why might that be so? Take a moment to add any relevant information you missed into your own chart.
2. Why is personal image so important for a political leader in seeking support from the voters? How would you describe the image of Stephen Harper and Michael Ignatieff?
3. What does "rebranding" a political leader's image mean? How has Stephen Harper sought to rebrand himself? How might Michael Ignatieff try to do the same?
4. Which of the two federal leaders do you think is more likely to win the next election? Why?

# PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

## *A Turning Point in Canadian Politics?*

### Quote

"In this autumn of our usual discontent with politics and politicians, we do not seem to be noticing that the balance between Canada's major parties is at or very near a historic tipping point . . . We appear to be on the verge of the great historic shift in party fortunes that Conservatives have hoped for, but have regularly failed to achieve, for more than a century." — Michael Bliss, *The Globe and Mail*, October 1, 2009

Opinion polls in the fall of 2009 indicated a growing trend in favour of the Conservatives and against the Liberals. As a result, some observers suggested that Canada was on the verge of a significant political turning point. According to historian Michael Bliss—an authority on Canadian political history—the rise in Stephen Harper's fortunes might represent a fundamental and long-term shift in the country's political allegiances. After all, Harper has successfully refashioned his once-right-wing party into a moderate, pragmatic, and centrist political force. He has also rebranded his own leadership style in a more positive light. Because of this, Bliss believes that Canadians may now be ready to regard the Conservatives as the "natural party of government," a distinction that for decades they had conferred on the Liberals.

### Natural Party of Government

By the term *natural party of government*, Bliss means the idea that one party is the default choice for government, which may only need to be replaced under unusual or extreme circumstances. History supports his conclusion, as the Liberals have dominated Canadian politics for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, punctuated by short interludes of Conservative rule, none of them lasting for more than a few years. Mackenzie King, the most successful Liberal leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, held power for most of the years between the 1920s and the 1940s, including the turbulent eras of the Great Depression and the Second World War. More recently, popular Liberal leaders like Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chretien also held power for significant periods of time from the 1960s to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Bliss sees many historical parallels between Mackenzie King and Stephen Harper. Neither leader could be regarded as charismatic or colourful, but both overcame their initial handicaps and developed into master political strategists with an uncanny ability to assess and take advantage of the weaknesses of their opponents. In King's case, the opponent was Arthur Meighen, a witty, intelligent, and articulate Conservative leader with a huge ego and a sense of destiny who in the end proved to be no match for King. For Harper, the challenger is Michael Ignatieff, also a scholarly, intellectual figure with limited hands-on political experience. To date, Ignatieff has not been able to turn these attributes to his advantage in the battle for public support with the bland but increasingly trusted Harper.

As for the parties themselves, Bliss views the Conservatives' experience of power under Harper as the litmus test for the party's newfound ability to present itself as a moderate, safe choice to govern the country. They have responded with some effectiveness to the challenges of the economic recession, and have abandoned many of the divisive, right-wing "wedge" issues that once served to consolidate their support among the party's base while turning off more mainstream, centrist Canadians.

On the other hand, the Liberals' stint in opposition since their electoral defeat in January 2006 has only worked to undermine party unity and create a mood of uncertainty and confusion. Ignatieff has had trouble focusing his attacks on Harper and the Conservatives, not knowing whether to confront them from the left—spending too little—or from the right—spending too much. In

Bliss's words, "under Mr. Harper, the Conservatives have learned the discipline of power. Under Michael Ignatieff, the Liberals are dissolving into the dreary disorder of the powerless."

### **Less Chance of an Election**

The receding likelihood of a federal election in 2009 leads Bliss to conclude that the Conservatives' growing confidence and strength under Harper's leadership, alongside the weakness of the Liberals, may enable them to govern as if they had a majority well into 2010 or even beyond. At the same time, unless a dramatic turn-around in Liberal fortunes

occurs soon, Bliss believes that the party's chances of forming a majority government in the immediate future, especially under Ignatieff's leadership, are slim to none. He points to Liberal difficulties in Quebec, once a party stronghold, as evidence of their decline and suggests that Harper may be able to win a majority even without significant support in that province in the next election, especially if the Bloc Québécois continues to maintain its virtual lock on most of the seats there.

Source: "Has Harper found his tipping point?" by Michael Bliss, *The Globe and Mail*, October 2, 2009

## **Analysis**

1. Bliss's analysis of the current Canadian political scene is controversial to be sure, but assuming it is correct, consider the following:
  - a) What would a new era of Conservative dominance mean for this country? Would Harper use the opportunity presented to him by a majority election victory to abandon his newfound moderate stance and return to the hard-line Conservative policy positions on economic and social issues he once advocated?
  - b) How would francophone Quebec voters feel if they were not well represented in a Conservative government with little support from their province? Would this sense of exclusion stoke the fires of the sovereignty movement, as it has done in the past?
  - c) As for the two left-of-centre opposition parties—the Liberals and the NDP—would the prospect of many years of Conservative majority rule spark a move to unite the centre-left? Most opinion polls indicate that a majority of Canadians view themselves as left-of-centre on the political spectrum, especially on social and environmental issues. A successful union of the Liberals and NDP, with a new leader to replace Ignatieff and the stumbling Jack Layton, might prove attractive as an alternative to the prospect of a prolonged era of Conservative majority rule.
2. Do you agree with Michael Bliss that Canadian politics may be on the verge of a significant turning point in favour of the Conservatives? Why or why not?

# PARLIAMENT AND THE ELECTION QUESTION

## *Activity: Minority Government Role-Play*

For this activity, you will be placed in a group that represents one of the federal political parties currently holding seats in Parliament. These parties include:

- Conservatives – 143 seats (Stephen Harper, Prime Minister)
- Liberals – 77 seats (Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Official Opposition)
- Bloc Québécois – 47 seats (Gilles Duceppe, leader)
- NDP – 36 seats (Jack Layton, leader)
- Greens – 0 seats (Elizabeth May, leader)

Note: Although the Green Party does not have any elected representatives in the House, they do have positions on the issues up for debate. Your teacher may choose to create a group of Greens for this activity. There is also one independent MP, and four vacant seats as of late October 2009.

Source: House of Commons, Party Standings 40<sup>th</sup> Parliament, [www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/house/partystandings/standings-e.htm](http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/house/partystandings/standings-e.htm)

### **Your Task**

As a class, you will select an issue that could result in a vote of non-confidence for the minority Conservative government. The following issues could be possible choices:

- The government's handling of the economic recession
- The government's management of the Employment Insurance program
- The government's policy on the war in Afghanistan
- The government's handling of health care
- The government's handling of the issue of protecting the rights of Canadian citizens abroad

### **Develop a Position**

Each group will outline their party's position on the issue that has been chosen and whether or not they are prepared to work with the other parties to avoid an election. As part of this process, your group may wish to visit the Web site of the federal political party you represent:

Conservatives: [www.conservative.ca](http://www.conservative.ca)

Liberals: [www.liberal.ca](http://www.liberal.ca)

Bloc Québécois: [www.blocquebecois.org](http://www.blocquebecois.org)

NDP: [www.ndp.ca](http://www.ndp.ca)

Green Party: [www.greenparty.ca](http://www.greenparty.ca)

### **Share Your Position**

Once your group has prepared its position, choose a spokesperson to present it to the other parties. The party spokespersons may then debate the issue, as might take place in Parliament.

Once the debate is finished, hold a vote of non-confidence on the issue under consideration in order to determine whether the government will be defeated and a new election will be held. Depending on the result of the vote, give the party spokespersons one more opportunity to state their reactions to the vote and what it means for the question of another federal election in Canada in 2009 or 2010.