

# Apathy, big lies, contempt and electoral dysfunction

by Joyce Green and Mike Burton

Right out of the gate in the 2011 federal election, the Harper campaign has managed to frame the terms of debate as the threat of a “coalition.” The media are largely giving the Conservatives a pass on this, allowing them to repeat the “Big Lie” as though it were true. With “coalition” now read pejoratively

(21 times in one of Harper’s media cross-nation opportunities on March 28), too many Canadians are ignorant of

the fact that coalitions are not illegitimate, unparliamentary, or unconstitutional. Coalitions do, however, require elected members to work collaboratively rather than with the toxic opposition the Conservatives have demonstrated.

Prorogations, however, for the sole purpose of permitting the prime minister and cabinet to avoid facing the House of Commons, are highly problematic. Hold this thought.

The factors taking Canada into this election were not, as the Harper regime argues, opposition parties plotting “coalition” at the expense of a benevolent budget, but rather the Conservatives’ demonstrated contempt of Parliament. All opposition parties found themselves unable to gag down the government’s repeated abuse of our parliamentary and democratic processes, and its utter lack of honesty on key files. Well-respected (and retiring) Speaker Peter Milliken found the Conservatives in contempt of Parliament, a first in Canadian history and indeed, a first in the entire Commonwealth. Supporting the government in these circumstances is akin to a battered spouse going back to the batterer to give him

one more chance (to do it again).

Mr. Milliken ruled that the Conservative government failed to provide the House of Commons with the information to which it is entitled, about the spending involved with its defence (pricey single-sourced jets) and law and order (pricey ineffective counter-productive jails) policies. He suggested that the Conservative government chose to give misleading

information to Parliament. Parliament is charged with holding the political executive, that

is, the prime minister and cabinet, accountable, but Parliament cannot do this without the timely and accurate information to which it is entitled. The Harper regime rendered Parliament unable to do its job for the people of Canada, yet now claims Her Majesty’s Loyal and other opposition parties were the ones who failed.

This contempt of Parliament issue should be the primary issue in the election. It is corrosive of our democratic quotient, but it is consistent with the fierce control and partisanship the prime minister has exerted over his caucus and neutral meritocratic civil servants alike. For example, scientists serving Canadians in federal departments have been gagged; senior agency managers such as Linda Keen, the former head of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, have been fired; whistleblowers such as Richard Colvin have had their reputa-

tions trashed; and neutral reliable information that could challenge government spin has been eliminated in the case of the long-form census. We’re witnessing “l’etat, c’est moi” approach to democratic government. And this contempt is consistent with the refusal of the prime minister to face the House of Commons non-confidence motion in Dec. 2008, preferring instead to obtain the governor-general’s dispensation for the prorogation which brought many Canadians into the streets in protest. That contempt was expressed again in the bizarrely heavy-handed “security” enforced against Canadian citizen protests during the G8/G20 summits in Toronto.

This latest expression of contempt of the government for its parliament and its people is an indication of poor democratic health, but it is only one of a number of manifestations of that malaise. The widening gap between

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**The widening gap between the very rich and the working and very poor is another measure of democratic and moral failure.**

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the very rich and the working and very poor is another measure of democratic and moral failure. The increase in propaganda at the expense of environmental science is another. The demonization of political

opponents is a third. The lack of a serious medium and long term national economic strategy, other than obeisance to “the markets,” is a fourth. The lack of policy attention to the social supports we all need, such as childcare, elder care, palliative care, and rational affordable health care is a fifth. Our collective inability to provide appropriate education, from post-secondary education to the trades, is risible. Our national lack of concern for Aboriginal peoples is an international embarrassment. We could go on.

Political institutions and their processes also matter for democracy: Canada’s



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HARPER INTRODUCED MANY CANADIANS TO A NEW VOCABULARY WORD WHEN HE HAD PARLIAMENT SHUT DOWN IN ITS TRACKS.

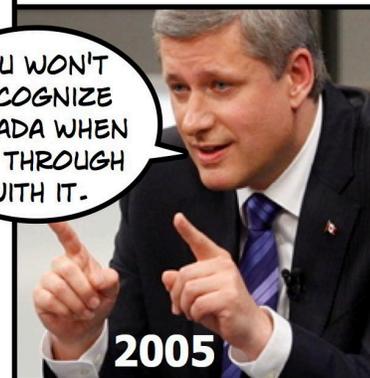
## PROROGUE

To interrupt the democratic process when it's not going your way.

HE DUCKED ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUES, KILLED >30 BILLS, AND WASTED OUR \$.



HE WASN'T KIDDING WHEN HE SAID



Comic from <http://compellingcomics.justsomeguy.com> — Michael Nalbert

## Excerpts from rabble's online election coverage:

Thing is: it's not only feminism under the gun of neoliberalism; it's everybody, minus a few breathtakingly wealthy people who are on the other end, taking aim at us. The Great Deception, however, is to convince enough people that they aren't in the sights, even as their masters' grips tighten on the trigger.

- Aalya Ahmad, April 8

In reflecting on the political realities of a potential Conservative majority, it is critical to reflect on systemic actions, undertaken by a Conservative minority parliament, to silence voices of dissent in Canada.

- Stefan Christoff, April 4

But in the early going of the campaign to determine our democracy there is a curious disengagement by labour and social movements. It is unclear yet whether our movements are simply unfocused on politics, slow to organize or fearful of consequences should Harper achieve the majority that seems possible. Regardless, failure to act now will mean that our mobilization, like the American and British, will be postponed until after Harper has the power he seeks.

- Fred Wilson, April 4

The daily reality of Canadian corporations supporting (and profiting) and Canadian forces actually fighting in foreign wars, the resultant damage to the environment, and people just does not seem to be important enough for any of the self-appointed party leaders to be talking about.

- Syed Hussan, April 3

## Apathy, big lies, contempt, electoral dysfunction

... continued from front:

plurality (first past the post) electoral system is responsible for an astonishing lack of democratic representation, and for the production of unrepresentative governments. It is through this system that the Harper regime hopes to consolidate its hold on Parliament. With a proportional representation system — advocated by scholars and by the illustrious Law Reform Commission of Canada (its funding axed by the Harper regime) — almost all votes, all political flavours, would culminate in the election of a proportional number of representatives. Such Parliaments must work together. The tactics of the Harper regime are inimical to the healthy functioning of our current system, and

would be intolerable with a PR system. (Interested readers are referred to the LRC and to Dennis Pilon, *The Politics of Voting*, Emond Montgomery Press 2007).

The consequence of toxic levels of anti-democratic contempt has left many Canadians questioning the health of public politics. But they must do more than sit back on the sofa and change the channel. That would be contemptible. As we watch brave people in the Arab Spring risk life and well-being to obtain democratic change, we may want to collectively maintain our own democratic practices with rather more vigour.

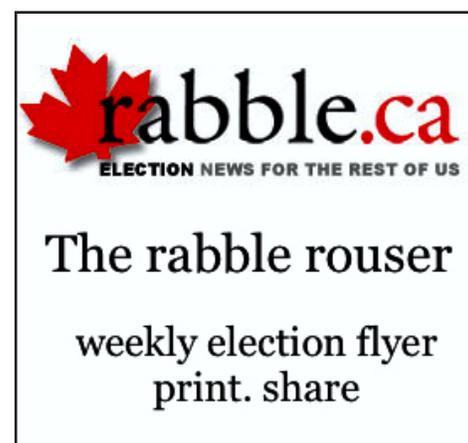
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## rabble celebrates 10 years

Ten years ago, in April 2001 at the Summit of the Americas, the security walls came down in Quebec City as one of the largest gatherings of the anti-globalization movement showed its power in the fight against capitalist globalization and trade liberalization.

The independent, progressive news website, rabble.ca, was born out of this sense of outrage -- as well as hope for a different path, and for the potential of the open internet to change the way news was reported and shared.

A decade later, in an increasingly militarized Canada and concentrated media environment, rabble.ca was out front covering the G8/G20 in Toronto. When the police charged as the protesters sang Oh Canada, rabble.ca was there. Today, over 125,000 Canadians log in to rabble every month to read stories, listen



to the podcasts, watch videos, and debate the future of Canada (and more) with each other via our forum, babble.