

***Two Cheers for Minority Government: The Evolution of
Canadian Parliamentary Democracy***
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Chapter One: Introduction

On January 23, 2006, we Canadians elected a new Parliament—Canada’s 39th since Confederation. The House of Commons in this Parliament had 125 Conservative, 102 Liberal, 51 Bloc Québécois, 29 NDP, and 1 Independent MP. **That, incidentally, is what we Canadians—and the citizens of all parliamentary democracies—do at election time. We don’t elect a government; we elect a representative assembly. The government is formed by the leader of the party that has the confidence (that is, the support of a majority of the members) of the elected branch of the legislature—in our federal parliamentary system, the House of Commons.**

The day after the election, Paul Martin, the prime minister going into the election, remained the prime minister. That is always the case in parliamentary elections. Remember that, through our votes, we the electorate create a parliament, not a government. Even Kim Campbell remained prime minister for a very short time after the 1993 election in which her Progressive Conservatives garnered only two seats in the 295-seat House of Commons. The day after the election, Prime Minister Campbell called on Governor General Ray Hnatyshyn to tell him whether she intended to carry on as prime minister or resign. Of course, with such a miserable election result, Campbell really had no choice. She offered her resignation and advised his Excellency to call on Jean Chrétien, whose Liberals had a large majority in the newly elected House of Commons, to form a government.

On January 24, 2006, although Paul Martin’s Liberals had done much better than Campbell’s Progressive Conservatives, Martin’s options were really not much better than Campbell’s. Theoretically, he could have decided to try his luck with the new House of Commons and see whether he could secure the support of the NDP and enough Bloc members to support a Liberal minority government. But that was surely a most unattractive and unlikely base for governing. So, Prime Minister Martin did the sensible thing. On January 24, he submitted his resignation to Governor General Michaëlle Jean and advised her to call on Stephen Harper, the Conservative leader, to form a government. Mr. Harper did not hesitate to accept Madam Jean’s commission.

The government that Mr. Harper formed and that was sworn in on February 6, 2006 was a minority government. With 125 Conservatives in a 308-member House, the Harper government would clearly need the support of other parties to survive. But unlike Martin, whose personal and party fortunes were on the down slope, Harper’s and the new

Conservative party's were on the rise. Mr. Harper and his colleagues were anxious to govern, even though they faced a very uncertain situation in the House of Commons. In politics, the momentum of the day can be compelling. And so Mr. Harper formed the twelfth minority government in Canadian history at the federal level.

Though keen to accept the Governor General's commission to form a government, Mr. Harper has not been a happy minority government prime minister. He has made it clear, time and time again, that he would like—and that he needs—a majority government. In this he is no different from all who have been or who aspire to be prime minister. From the prime minister's perspective, it is much easier to govern if your party has a majority in the House of Commons.

As a matter of fact, if you or I were faced with the prospect of being prime minister, we would probably prefer to lead a majority rather than a minority government, too; it really is much easier to govern when your party has a majority in the House. A majority government can stay totally “on message”—even if that message has been rejected at the polls by a majority of voters. There is no need to make any concessions to opposing points of view. A majority government will not have to bother with tiresome parliamentary debates or parliamentary committees it cannot control. From the perspective of prime ministers, majority government is clearly the preferred option.

But I do not think majority governments are so good for you, dear reader, unless—and this is a big unless—you do not want to be governed by a parliamentary government. If you prefer prime-ministerial, CEO-style government—governing without meaningful parliamentary debate and regardless of popular support in the country—then go for it. Use your vote to give the leader of one of the larger parties control of government for four years. But I hope that, like me, you prefer parliamentary government, and will vote for the party or candidate of your choice, without worrying about whether any party will have a majority.

My main aim in what follows is to explain why a minority government is not only the most likely outcome of the next election, but—contrary to what you may hear from Mr. Harper or other party leaders—is also, for most of us, the best possible outcome. Minority governments have their problems, and I will address them later in this book; note that I am giving minority government only two “cheers.” I find it difficult to muster even one cheer for its main alternative—false majority government.

In the end, even if I fail to convince you of the merits of minority government, I hope that this book will help both you and our politicians make the most of minority government, give it more stability, and make it work as well as it can for our country. For, whether you like it or not, we are going to have a lot of minority government in the future. So let's make it work as well as possible—and learn to enjoy it rather than curse it.