

Policy Matters



What Could
Canadians
Expect from
a Minority
Government?

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Biographical notes

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Introduction

In the last 26 years Canada has had six majority parliaments at the federal level while experiencing only one eight-month period of minority government. By contrast, during the previous 17 years — from June 1957 to July 1974 — there were five minority parliaments, interspersed by just two majority governments. Indeed between 1962 and 1968, there was a string of three successive minority governments.

Even though five political parties have contested the two federal elections since 1993, a situation which makes the achievement of a majority a challenge, the Liberal party has twice during this period succeeded in winning majorities, assisted on the political right by vote splitting between the Progressive Conservatives and the Reform party, and on the left by the decline in support for the NDP. In 1997, however, the margin of victory for the Liberal government was slight. Although the party continues to lead in public opinion polls, speculation has been growing that the next federal election might result in a minority government.

While not making any predictions on the result, this prospect is sufficiently real that it justifies a review of Canada's past experience with minority government. What have been the characteristics of the nine minority governments that federal elections have produced? How stable were they? How did they function? How long did they last? Why did they come to an end?

Against this background, we shall then examine whether and to what degree changes made in the past 30 years in the rules of procedure of the House of Commons might lead to novel challenges to the controls that minority governments have exercised in the past. In particular, we shall consider ways in which the influence of private members and parliamentary committees on the legislative process might be enhanced.

Past Experience

At the federal level there have been nine minority governments since Confederation. As the table on pages 6 and 7 shows, their tenure has varied substantially, depending in large measure on whether the governing party found a willing partner among the opposition parties. How and why the minority parliaments came to an end also varied considerably.

All five Liberal minority governments sought and found partners among the opposition parties. The closest collaboration with a partner occurred during the

minority government of 1972. Aware that the Liberals had the option of leaning toward the Social Credit, the NDP caucus concluded that close co-operation with the Liberals would enable them to move the government's policy agenda to the left. In effect the NDP, while rejecting an arrangement as close as a coalition, decided to form what amounted to an alliance with the Liberals. Every policy proposal, all legislation, was discussed between representatives of the two parties — primarily Allan MacEachen and Stanley Knowles. Only when agreement had been reached did the government proceed to introduce a bill, confident that with NDP support, the bill would pass. As a result, the environment in which the House operated was fairly predictable. That the accommodation collapsed in 1974 resulted from an NDP decision to vote against the Liberal budget, out of concern that they were being compromised through too-close collaboration with the Liberals. The government learned about this decision through a leak. Having assessed the electoral horizon, it concluded that its prospects for winning a majority in a new election were good. So it deliberately crafted a budget that would sell well in an election. In essence, the government sought defeat over the budget because it provided the ground for calling an election which it expected to win — and its judgement proved to be right.

While the relationships with opposition parties established by the two Pearson governments and by the two Mackenzie King governments were not as close as the Trudeau government's alliance with the NDP, they nevertheless proved to be relatively dependable. The Progressives had a certain affinity with the Liberals (they eventually joined them) so that it was not too difficult for the Liberal government to tailor measures that would gain Progressive support. In the 1960s the Pearson governments had the option of tilting left toward the NDP or right toward the Social Credit party (and, in the 27th Parliament, toward the Ralliement des Cr ditistes as well). A number of other factors eased the government's path: it lacked but few votes to achieve a majority; internal battles continued to divide and distract the Progressive Conservative party within the House; and Mr. Pearson's conciliatory personality smoothed the way. It is true that confusion on the government front bench in February 1968 led to the defeat of a tax bill when a motion for third reading was defeated by a vote of 82-84 — incidentally the last time a government bill was defeated in the House. Prime Minister Pearson argued that this defeat did not constitute an expression of non-confidence in the government, as the Conservatives were claiming. To establish the point the government introduced a motion "that this House does not regard its vote on February 19th in connection with third reading of Bill C-193, which had carried in all previous stages, as a vote of non-confidence in the Government." The Ralliement des Cr dites was sufficiently anxious to avoid an election that

**Table 1
Minority Governments at the Federal Level**

Date of Election	Tenure (Length of Parliament)	Governing Party and Leader	Partner Party	Reason for Next Election
December 6, 1921 (14th Parliament)	March 8, 1922 to September 5, 1925	Liberal Mackenzie King	Progressive	Called by government.
October 29, 1925 (15th Parliament)	January 7, 1926 to June 26, 1926	Liberal Mackenzie King	Progressive	On June 26, 1926, King asked the Governor General dissolve Parliament and call a general election. The Governor General refused and King resigned. The Governor General then called upon Arthur Meighen, leader of the Liberal-Conservatives, to form a government.
Continuation of 15th Parliament On June 29, 1926, Meighen formed a government with the support of a minority of the members of the House: (government 116; combined opposition 129).	June 29, 1926 to July 2, 1926	Conservative Arthur Meighen	None	The government lasted only three days, losing a vote (96-95) on what amounted to a motion of censure of the government. Parliament was dissolved.

**Table 1 (continued)
Minority Governments at the Federal Level**

Date of Election	Tenure (Length of Parliament)	Governing Party and Leader	Partner Party	Reason for Next Election
June 10, 1957 (23rd Parliament)	October 14, 1957 to February 1, 1958	Progressive Conservative John Diefenbaker	None	Called by government.
June 18, 1962 (25th Parliament)	September 27, 1962 to February 6, 1963	Progressive Conservative John Diefenbaker	None	Vote of non-confidence: the Diefenbaker minority government was defeated on a supply motion.
April 8, 1963 (26th Parliament)	May 16, 1963 to September 8, 1965	Liberal Lester Pearson	Social Credit and NDP	Called by government.
November 8, 1965 (27th Parliament)	January 18, 1966 to April 23, 1968	Liberal Lester Pearson	Social Credit and NDP	Called by government.
October 30, 1972 (29th Parliament)	January 4, 1973 to May 9, 1974	Liberal Pierre Trudeau	NDP	Lost a vote on an NDP budget motion sub-amendment. Parliament dissolved.
May 22, 1979 (31st Parliament)	October 9, 1979 to December 14, 1979	Progressive Conservative Joe Clark	None	Lost a vote on a budget motion sub-amendment by 139-133. Parliament dissolved.

they supported this precedent-setting motion, which as a result passed by a vote of 138-119 on February 28th.

In short, four of the five Liberal minority governments proved to be relatively stable, lasting on average more than two years. Indeed, the 14th Parliament lasted a full term. The fifth came to an end after only a few months when Prime Minister King sought dissolution in June 1926. The denial of this request by the Governor General led Mr. King to resign to avoid having to face the embarrassing consequences of a scandal involving the Customs Department.

That the other four minority governments were short-lived has a variety of explanations. The government of 1957-58 lasted but nine months. Even though the Liberal party was in disarray and initially preoccupied with electing a new leader, Prime Minister Diefenbaker acted prudently, showing concern for the interests of the minor parties in order to secure their support. He even offered Stanley Knowles of the NDP the speakership. But as soon as the Prime Minister was satisfied that his party could win a majority, he called an election.

The short life of Diefenbaker's second minority Parliament was due to the sharp division of opinion within his government over whether to accept nuclear warheads for the Bomarc air defence missiles that Canada had acquired from the United States. Following Mr. Pearson's speech in Scarborough committing the Liberal party to accepting nuclear warheads, tensions within the government reached a point where several ministers joined the opposition in voting to defeat a supply motion, thereby bringing down the government.

Joe Clark's government of 1979-80 lasted but nine months. In retrospect, Mr. Clark made an error in judgement when he decided "to govern as if we had a majority." Had he catered to the Social Credit party under Fabien Roy, who was anxious to avoid another election — evidence of his prescience since the party was wiped out in the 1980 election — Mr. Clark could have mustered a slim majority, especially since he had appointed a Liberal as speaker. Lacking the assured support of a partner, it was particularly imprudent to include in the government's first budget an unpopular tax increase of 18 cents a gallon on gasoline.

There remains only the short-lived government headed by Prime Minister Meighen in 1926. Apart from facing a combined opposition that was ideologically unfriendly, Mr. Meighen had to confront a problem that no longer exists. Under the rules of procedure that were in force at that time, ministers had to resign their seats and seek re-election before they could formally hold office. To avoid this requirement, Mr. Meighen appointed acting ministers, a practice that Mr. King used to discredit the new government, which was defeated within three days.

Another feature of past experience to be noted is that only three of the nine minority governments fell as a result of a vote in the House that the government was unable to avoid. Five of the other minority governments fell on the initiative of the sitting prime minister and the sixth on a vote that was welcomed by the government.

In the main, minority Parliaments have been relatively stable. Ontario's experience under Premier Davis, who headed two successive minority governments, one of which lasted a full term, demonstrated similar characteristics. Mr. Davis' deft political skills and his attention to the concerns of the two opposition parties, contributed much to that stability.

These several experiences suggest that the degree of stability of minority parliaments is a function of the relative numbers of seats held by the government party and by the different opposition parties, the relationships between the various parties, the leverage that minority parties might acquire by supporting the governing party and the assessment of each party as to how it would fare in a new election.

It should be observed, however, that only one of the stable federal minority parliaments lasted a full term. This is hardly surprising. Not only do minority governments find it frustrating to have to constantly trim their policies to catch some of the wind blowing from the opposition benches — at least enough to secure the passage of their legislation — but they also have to be ever on the alert for fear of a miscalculation that could bring them down. Minority governments simply lack the certainty that comes from having a majority that can be counted on. So a minority government is always sniffing the mood of the electorate to determine whether another election might bring a majority and is quick to move if the signs are encouraging.

Curiously, at the provincial level coalitions have been formed on a number of occasions in the past. This is the route recently taken in Saskatchewan. Many years previously the centre-right parties in both Manitoba and British Columbia adopted this strategy in order to keep the socialists at bay. In both cases these arrangements endured for a couple of decades, although the lead partner sometimes changed.

Although this practice can produce greater certainty and therefore a potentially more enduring government, it has its own complications. As a result it has never caught on at the federal level in Canada, as it has in Europe where proportional representation has made coalitions the norm. Apart from the constant negotiations required to resolve differences that inevitably arise within coalitions, the lead party resents giving up its capacity to take unilateral decisions.

An important characteristic of minority governments that the table does not reveal is the different dynamic that a minority parliament induces.

A majority government, particularly one with a sizeable majority, is not at risk of losing a vote. Accordingly opposition parties can adopt policy positions and employ tactics confident in the knowledge that they will not be suddenly called upon to take responsibility for their words and actions. However, faced with the prospect in a minority parliament that it might suddenly be called upon by the Governor General to form a government or be faced with an election, the official opposition tends to be more prudent. As for smaller parties, should they be in a position to exert political leverage through the exercise of their votes, they soon learn that influence on the policies of the government comes at a price — tempering their behaviour in the House and in committees.

A minority parliament also influences the dynamics within the government party. Private members recognize that the fate of the government depends on their support, leading them to adhere more closely to the party line. Likewise ministers — aware of the possible consequences of ignoring the concerns of their members — tend to be more attentive to the views of their supporters in the House. The outcome is greater coherence within each party.

Yet another characteristic of the peculiar dynamics of minority parliaments is the effect on inter-party relations. The potential instability of the situation, particularly the risk of suddenly and unexpectedly being faced with an election, tempers the behaviour of most members. Ministers in turn, desirous of avoiding unexpected obstacles, will pay greater attention to the concerns of all members, not only to their own supporters. Incongruously, the greater competition between parties leads ministers to devote more attention to communication with private members and to inter-party collaboration. Evidence of this more cautious approach can be observed in a study by Professor Ned Franks which concluded that the number of recorded votes diminished during minority governments.

Changes in Procedure and Practice

Three substantial changes adopted during the past generation in the Standing Orders of the House of Commons have introduced new elements that might affect the capacity of a minority government to control the business of the House. However, since these procedural changes have not been tested in a minority parliament, their effect cannot be anticipated with confidence.

The first change, adopted in 1968, under which all departmental estimates are now referred to the relevant standing committee, posed a few problems in 1973 for the Trudeau minority government. During that year two committees

exploited this new power to vote reductions, but an election was called before the practice expanded.

The second change, put in place in 1983 and confirmed in 1985, accorded standing committees the right to meet any time that the House is in session. Committees were also given the power to determine their own agendas, unless they have received a directive from the House that would have priority. However, as there have been no minority parliaments since these changes were adopted, their impact has never been tested.

Another change, first introduced in 1986 and subsequently enhanced, has increased the opportunity for private members to have their bills debated and voted. This has substantially enlarged the scope and impact of private members' business. A commitment in the Liberal Red Book of 1993 not to adopt a party position on private members' business has been observed, so that government backbenchers and members of opposition parties have become accustomed to a certain independence. The combination of this change in procedure and in practice makes it particularly difficult to anticipate its implications for a minority government.

Implications of committees gaining the power to meet

Prior to 1983, standing committees could not meet unless they received an order of reference from the House of Commons, which in practice had to be initiated by the government. These orders laid out the committee's mandate in specific terms, so that they were constrained to discuss only matters falling within that mandate. Save for the automatic referral each year of the relevant departmental estimates to all committees, which took effect in 1968, only one or two committees were normally directed to meet at any one time. Accordingly during the minority Parliament of 1972-74, it was not difficult for the government whip to maintain control over developments in the few committees that were meeting.

It is worth noting that following the 1972 election the government, nonetheless, sought to strengthen its position in committees by inviting the official opposition to select the chairs of several committees. Since chairs do not vote in committees unless there is a tie, the objective was to reduce the number of opposition votes and increase those of government members, thereby reducing the risk of adverse votes. Sensitive to the purpose of the invitation, the Conservative leadership rejected the offer, although one member of that caucus — Jack Horner — broke ranks and was made chair of the Transport Committee.

The decision of the House to adopt the recommendations of the Lefebvre Committee of 1983 and the McGrath Committee of 1985, notably to give stand-

ing committees the right to meet if and when they wish and to determine their own agendas, has created a new situation. With the steady increase in House business, most of the 20-odd committees now meet whenever Parliament is in session. Moreover, virtually all bills are now referred to committee for review. Since these changes in practice were adopted, governments have had a majority in each committee and strict party discipline has ensured that amendments are usually adopted in committee only if the responsible minister has given government members the go-ahead.

The situation in a minority parliament could be different. However, the impact would depend on a number of variables: the size of the minority; the number, orientation and size of the various opposition parties; and the strategic calculations of each party. As noted above, minority parliaments have been quite stable as long as an opposition party with sufficient votes decided that its interest was served by co-operating with the government.

Bearing these qualifications in mind, the following list suggests possible developments in the role of private members and points to some uncertainties and difficulties that a minority government might face now that committees have the power to meet when the House is in session.

- Electing the chairs of committees could be beyond the control of the government leadership unless the House leaders were willing and able to reach agreement on a division of those offices between the various political parties. If an agreement were not reached, the chairs of committees could be determined by genuine elections decided by members of each committee rather than selection by the leadership of the governing party, the practice of majority governments. Genuine elections could introduce an unpredictable dynamic.
- Given the tendency evident in previous minority governments for ministers to pay greater attention to and respond to the views and concerns of members of all parties, in order to avoid surprise developments, committees could gain greater influence than they have in a majority parliament. Ministers and their officials might find that they had to provide more information and devote more time and energy appearing before committees than occurs in majority parliaments, trying to persuade MPs of the validity of legislation or policies that the government was advancing.
- Even if a working agreement were reached with one or two opposition parties, with 20-odd committees meeting regularly, each with its own

dynamic, the kind of monitoring and control exercised in a majority parliament by the government House leader and whip would be difficult to sustain. It is questionable whether the terms of any agreement reached with an opposition party would be so clearly understood by the members of that party on each committee that they could be counted on in every instance to work as a team with the MPs from the government party. A measure of responsibility for avoiding unwelcome decisions and actions by committees would fall on the minister and senior public servants of the government departments relating to each committee.

- If a minority government opted to offer some committee chairmanships to opposition parties as a way of gaining a vote in those committees and the offer was accepted, the autonomy of those committees might be enhanced.
- A minority government would face a particular challenge if committees amended bills in ways that the government did not favour. A remedy provided by the Standing Orders — restoring a preferred text at report stage in the House — would be difficult to accomplish. Since the Standing Orders permit sub-amendments without notice, opposition parties could by this device frustrate any corrective measures undertaken by the government. As the recent marathon votes on amendments to the bill on the Nisga'a Agreement and on the Clarity Bill demonstrated, the opposition has recently unearthed a powerful weapon in the form of substantial numbers of amendments at the report stage. Moreover, the usual practice of a majority government — moving time allocation early on at report stage — would probably not be open to it since an opposition party ready to act as a partner might, nevertheless, be uneasy supporting time allocation. As a result, a minority government could face protracted report stage debates without even the assurance of restoring preferred texts at the end.

Implications of estimates being reviewed by standing committees

In 1968, as a result of growing difficulty in securing Parliament's approval of the government's expenditure proposals during the two minority governments led by Mr. Pearson, the House of Commons reached unanimous agreement to refer all departmental estimates to the relevant standing committee instead of being considered in the Committee of Supply — a committee composed of the full membership of the House with responsibility for approving expenditure plans. A Special Committee on Procedure and Organization had reached agreement that the traditional Supply procedures

were “time-consuming, repetitive and archaic” and did not permit effective scrutiny of the estimates. The opposition concluded that giving committees three months to hold meetings to review departmental estimates with the power to question expert witnesses would enable them to probe the expenditure proposals in depth. In practice, however, under majority government the opposition has, if anything, been worse off than it was when estimates were considered in the Committee of Supply. It has proven difficult to get ministers to come to committee and when they do, they leave when the time slot for the committee meeting comes to an end. Yet more constraining is a rule that, if committees have not voted on estimates by the end of the month of May, they are deemed to have been reported to the House without change. As a result, since this rule change was adopted, departmental estimates have received only cursory examination. More significantly, party discipline has ensured that since the reform of 1968, save for the minority government of 1972-74, not one dollar of any department’s proposed budget has been cut or shifted by the vote of a committee.

The minority government of 1972-74 was the first to face the consequences of committee votes to reduce funds for specific departmental activities. In 1973, the relevant committees voted to reduce CBC vote 50 by \$1000 (the salary of the President) and to reduce vote 1 of the Department of the Solicitor General by some 10 percent. Members of the opposition parties combined to cut the administrative budget of that department to convey their dissatisfaction with its policy on the paroling of prisoners.

The government of the day decided to acquiesce in the committee’s decision in the first case. It even appeared to be pleased to remind the President of the CBC that the organization was subordinate to its political masters.

The reaction to the reduction by the committee of the administrative budget of the Department of the Solicitor General was quite different. The rule changes adopted in 1968 permit the House to accept, or to reject, a committee report on the estimates, in effect giving the government the opportunity to propose the restoration of funds cut by the committee — which it did in this case. As a result, the opposition parties that had combined to make the cut had the choice either to vote for deletion of a portion of the department’s administrative vote as they had done in committee (and possibly defeat the government) or acquiesce in its reinstatement. To avoid any risk of defeat, the government took advantage of the close working relationship with the NDP that it enjoyed during that Parliament to persuade them to go along with the reversal of the committee’s decision.

It was not surprising that in 1973 only two committees took advantage of the opportunity to modify the estimates referred to them for review. All lacked

experience and there were no precedents to follow. Besides, the close working arrangement with the Liberal government inclined NDP committee members to look for common ground with Liberals. Nor was there another chance the next year because the election came in 1974 before committees were called upon to report on estimates.

A serious problem arose during the two short months in the late autumn of 1979 of the 31st minority Parliament when, in the course of the review of supplementary estimates, the Miscellaneous Estimates Committee rejected votes 1 to 25 for the Treasury Board. However, the supply process was not completed before the dissolution of Parliament, so that the final stage of the challenge represented by the committee's votes was never reached. Since then there have been four successive majority governments where party discipline has assured approval of estimates by all committees without change.

The consequences for parliamentary approval of departmental estimates when a minority government is next elected are difficult to predict. As noted earlier, much depends on the size of the minority and the number, size, orientation and calculations of each opposition party. Another factor that could influence the way committees treat estimates would be the extent to which members of individual committees develop a shared interest in the committee's business. If a strong shared interest were to develop, committee members might combine to bargain with the responsible minister. Something of the sort happened during a Trudeau parliament, when Liberal MPs from the Atlantic provinces and Quebec were together able to secure improved terms for unemployment insurance payments in areas of high unemployment by suggesting, but never actually threatening, that they might vote with opposition members against the bill.

What is evident is that precedents for a vote by committees in a minority parliament to modify estimates now exist. Opposition members of some committees could be expected to propose reductions or the reassignment of monies. If the proposals related to issues of concern to a significant economic community or to a major region of the country, the minister and his senior staff could be strongly pressed to justify the relevant figures in the estimates. Depending on their responses, the government members of the committee might decide to lobby the responsible minister to accept a modification of the departmental estimates. If the minister declined to approve an amendment and the committee still persisted and reported a change in the estimates, the government could face a dilemma — accept the report of the committee or seek to restore cuts and risk defeat. However, the consequences of a failure to restore cuts would depend on the balance of forces in the House. As the Pearson gov-

ernment established in 1968, the rejection of a section of a bill need not lead to the defeat of the government on an issue of confidence. Indeed such an outcome could enhance the authority of Parliament.

Enhanced private members business

Beginning in 1986, a series of rule changes have resulted in increased opportunities for the consideration of private members' business. These changes have opened up a third area with a slight potential to complicate the position of a minority government. Previously, very few private members' bills and motions came to a vote and there were fewer opportunities than there are now for debate on these items. In response to a widespread desire on the part of members of all parties to see the odds increased that their bills could be adopted, the rules governing the handling of these bills have been progressively relaxed.

As a result, somewhat more private members bills have been enacted than was previously the case. A significant factor leading to this result has been the decision of the Liberal party, formulated in the 1993 Red Book, not to adopt a "party line" on these bills. Even though concerned ministers have at times urged their party colleagues to support or vote against a specific bill, the commitment not to whip has been maintained and government members have been free in the final analysis to disregard a minister's advice and vote as they pleased.

The position taken by the Liberal government has to some degree been adopted by the opposition parties. Members have appreciated the freedom to make up their own minds when voting on private members' bills. While this practice is not inscribed in any rule, it is becoming accepted as a custom. A difficulty could arise for a minority government if opposition parties were able to combine and use this avenue to present bills advancing policies contrary to those espoused by the government. While this is improbable, it is conceivable. If it happened, a minority government confronted with such a development might decide to adopt a party position and insist that its members vote the party line, thereby eliminating one of the opportunities for private members to decide themselves how to vote. However, in the unlikely event that opposition members had united, they would have the votes necessary to prevail no matter what position the government took.

Prospects

Against this historical background and bearing in mind recent developments, how might a minority parliament function in the present context? The key factor would be the size of the governing party's minority and the number of MPs

electd by each of the other parties. Since that information will be unknown until an election leading to a minority parliament takes place, the most that can be done at this time is to consider the implications of a variety of scenarios.

The most stable, predictable and easily managed situation would see the Liberals returned with a small minority and the NDP with enough seats to provide a majority. Already some members of the NDP caucus, harking back to the 1972 Parliament, are speaking in support of a new alliance with the Liberals as a way of moving the national policy agenda to the left. Unless the Conservatives were to elect enough members to provide an alternative majority — enabling the Liberal government to choose between turning left or right — the leverage of the NDP would be quite strong. If the Conservatives' numbers were sufficient to provide a majority and the NDP's were not, then the dynamics of the situation might move the policy agenda to the right.

Should the election result leave neither the NDP nor the Conservatives with enough seats to offer a majority, a possible scenario would have the combined membership of those two parties sufficient to provide a majority. In policy terms they are not natural partners. But to avoid an early election, they might each decide to support the government. Given the circumstances, such a scenario would be less stable and more difficult for the leaders of the co-operating parties to manage.

A third scenario could find the NDP and Conservatives with insufficient seats, even when combined, to provide the votes needed to assure the governing party a majority. This would be a much less predictable and stable Parliament. Initially the leaders of all parties would be testing the public mood, trying to develop an appropriate strategy, while taking care not to bring about an early election. In such a circumstance, a Liberal minority government could for some months probably count on attracting the support of the Bloc Québécois for bills that leaned to the left and the Canadian Alliance for bills that leaned to the right. But it is unlikely that such a Parliament would have a long life. Personal relations between the leadership of the three parties would probably not be good enough to permit the kind of preliminary exploratory talks necessary to produce a dependable agreement on the adjustments required in draft legislation to gain the support of one or other of the two parties. Besides it is unlikely either party would want to prop up a Liberal minority government for long.

If the Canadian Alliance were to end up with the largest number of seats, that would represent a fourth scenario. While the orientation of the Bloc Québécois and the Alliance differ greatly, the Bloc might decide to offer support as a way of getting at the Liberals. As Mr. Diefenbaker did in 1957, the Alliance's objective would be to act cooperatively and reasonably, hoping to create a favourable public image that could translate into a majority in another election.

The life of such a Parliament would probably be short because the different social and economic orientations of the two parties would make cooperation increasingly difficult.

The new element that makes it harder to anticipate how a variety of minority parliaments would function is the rules changes adopted during the last 30 years described in the previous section of this paper. We earlier outlined how a minority situation in the past has caused the leadership and the membership of all parties in the House of Commons to act cautiously to avoid, as it were, upsetting the boat. In the past, however, when virtually all action took place on the floor of the Chamber, the number of activities was limited and therefore the danger of unexpected events occurring was minimal. The leadership of each party was as a result able to keep their fingers on the pulse and head off situations that might cause trouble.

But with one or more meetings taking place each week in some 20 different committees, the chances that the members of some of them might find common ground and vote to modify departmental estimates or to amend a bill are real. Faced with such developments, could the leadership of the governing party find partners ready to reverse a committee's decision in the House? Faced with uncertainty, would the leadership take the risk of trying to reverse a committee's decision if failure would lead to a defeat and possibly the collapse of the government and a new election?

With so many variables, how the next minority parliament will function is impossible to predict. What can be anticipated is that under certain scenarios, the larger role now open to committees could create opportunities for members of some of those committees — if they were to find common ground across party lines — to advance policies of mutual concern. For this to happen, not only would it require a minority government that lacked a willing partner with sufficient votes to provide a majority, but the mutual concerns of members of committees would also have to be sufficiently strong to cause them to turn their backs on inter-party rivalry in the House.

Quite aside from the range of uncertainties that would characterize a minority parliament, the interesting new variable that could result from the rules changes of the last 30 years is a potentially increased role for private members. Such a development could introduce an exciting new dynamic in the Canadian Parliament. But until an election resulting in a minority parliament has taken place, speculation on how that parliament would function must remain hypothetical.

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