Good, bad and ugly of hung parliaments; Canada's minority governments, if fragile by nature, have proven immensely consequential

The Toronto Star

October 20, 2019 Sunday

Section: INSIGHT; Pg. A13

Length: 1171 words

Byline: Mitch Potter Toronto Star

Body

A caustic election that exposed Canada's bitter geographic divisions ends in the most brutal way imaginable, with the party that finished first finding itself last in line for power. And very, very unhappy. It all sounds plausibly 2019, no?

But it was actually nearly a century ago - the ferocious yet inconclusive election of 1925 that saw Arthur Meighen's Conservatives capture 115 seats - 15 more than Mackenzie King's second-place Liberals - yet falling eight short of a majority.

The acid-tongued Meighen's rage grew as the dust settled, outflanked by his archrival King, who, as incumbent prime minister, was able to retain the confidence of Parliament with the help of a third party - the short-lived prairie upstarts, the Progressives, who held the balance of power with 22 seats.

Meighen, never at a loss for an erudite insult, went on to liken the re-emergent King to a grabby crustacean: "He clings to power like a lobster with lockjaw."

But Meighen grudgingly accepted the reality because that's how it works: sometimes our first-past-the-post system ignores who comes first and instead hands victory - and the right to form a precarious government - to the second, third and even fourth place finishers, combined. They don't have to put the partnership in writing. A formal coalition is not required. The confidence of Parliament is all that matters.

It's a lesson Canadian policy wonks are falling over themselves to get across as this grim campaign gallops down the home stretch toward Monday's final vote, with all polls suggesting Andrew Scheer's Conservatives and Justin Trudeau's Liberals stalled in a statistical dead heat.

Former Ontario premier Bob Rae weighing in on Twitter in response to Scheer's assertion he expects the leader with the most seats will form government, put it this way: "Leader with the confidence of the House of Commons governs. Leader without confidence doesn't get to govern."

Much of the attention has focused on process, precedent and pondering what sort of political marriages might be possible if Monday night delivers an indecisive minority scenario with no clear winner. But it's also worth sparing a thought for actual governance. And whether Canada's long and storied history of minority governments offer any clues to help navigate what might soon be upon us.

First, let's circle briefly back to Meighen. As noted above, he found himself last in line for power despite finishing first in 1925 - but he got it back the following year when a scandal-plagued King stepped down in the legendary constitutional crisis known as the King-Byng Affair. Meighen managed three whole days as prime minister before he

was brought down, losing confidence by a single vote and triggering yet another election. King, as it happened, laughed last, winning a plurality of Liberal seats in a vote that saw Meighen lose his own seat.

Historians look back upon that 1920s cycle as an especially unstable stretch in Canadian politics - a jack-in-the-box array of fleeting governments that found power altogether too hot a potato to hang on to for long. But Canada's minority governments, if fragile by nature, have in eras proven immensely consequential. And none more so than the back-to-back minorities led by Lester B. Pearson from 1963 to 1968, which gave rise to an astonishing array of progressive legislative leaps, including universal health care and the Canada Pension Plan.

Tom Kent, who served as senior policy adviser to Pearson, admits luck and timing were on the Liberals' side during the making of those breakthroughs. In a candid essay written a decade ago for Policy Options magazine, he described how Pearson's team almost destroyed itself in its very first year with "near-fatal" policy blunders. Yet they learned quickly from those mistakes and "went on to forge a strengthened, more resilient national politics," writes Kent.

"Today, both big parties would have us believe that minority government is inherently bad for us," Kent explains. "A majority is more comfortable for them. The public interest is another matter."

In Kent's admittedly rose-coloured view what made the Pearson minority governments move the needle so far was a willingness to let everyone in on the plan. This was not a 21st-century top-down "prime ministerial dictatorship," Kent writes. Instead, Pearson directed his consensus-seeking cabinet to engineer progressive change from the bottom up, drawing upon public-sector expertise, taking the temperature of provincial premiers, always "sensitive to the needs of the times."

What Pearson's team brought to the premiers' table was a willingness to blow up Ottawa's rigid departmental grip on how the provinces delivered programs. Stick with us, the feds, in principle and you, the provinces, can forget about the old centralist rules and instead will be free to vary the details and scale it as you see fit.

That's how the Canada Assistance Plan emerged as Pearson's major innovation in 1965 - a demonstration of a new spirit in federal-provincial relations that "paved the way for medicare," writes Kent.

The same "co-operative federalism" drove the health-care breakthrough, with Team Pearson promising a funding formula on the principles of "universal, comprehensive, portable between provinces and publicly administered." Quebec was the first to sign up. "Other provincial politicians came to Medicare at various speeds and with varying warmth. But they came. Public opinion, as well as federal cost-sharing, compelled them."

Pearson's Ottawa extended the same style of financing to post-secondary education, expanding universities and seeding community colleges. Its surge of successes was broken only by the flag debate - but even there, despite the filibustering fury of John Diefenbaker, the newly minted red Maple Leaf design came to pass in time for Canada's centennial celebrations.

If the mind boggles at how so fragile a government could attain so much with so little, Kent emphasizes that it all came to pass without any formal partnership with the NDP. Though the party "was in sympathy with many of the Pearson measures" and had some members "on friendly terms," there was "never any partnership." The Pearson governments were always just a single vote away from losing power the entire time.

That said, Kent saw, even in 2009, that the new century involved a set of daunting challenges that are a world beyond what he and his colleagues began to muddle through in 1964.

Today's politicians - whoever among Ottawa's wannabes emerge as the gonnabes - will "need to find a new way." But how far they actually get, he concludes, may be more about how they go about it than whether they wield majority rule.

"The fundamentals that worked then - firm objectives, sensitivity to the great needs of the times, co-operative federalism, cabinet government - are as necessary today," he writes.

"The lesson from the Pearson period is that if a government has or soon develops those fundamentals, it may do pretty well, whether or not it has a parliamentary majority."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); PRIME MINISTERS (76%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (76%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (76%); VOTERS & VOTING (73%); CRUSTACEANS (65%)

Person: JUSTIN TRUDEAU (79%)

Geographic: ONTARIO, CANADA (58%); CANADA (93%)

Load-Date: October 20, 2019