
Collaboration or Confrontation in the 38th Parliament?

by Hon. Tony Valeri, PC, MP

This article argues that although a minority Parliament might cause us to rethink our understanding of leadership, the principles of effective leadership in a democracy are equally applicable in a majority or minority setting.



A few years ago, I read an article that has stayed with me, about the changing skills that leaders of multinational corporations need to succeed in the New Economy, and what change might mean for Canadians. The article said:

...the traditional [leadership] style of leading the troops over the hill to conquer is out of favour in an economy increasingly marked by mergers, joint ventures and

co-operative networking. Being able to work collaboratively – delegating responsibility and appreciating diversity – is becoming the way of the New Economy...Canadian senior executives are in the enviable position of being leaders in this approach.¹

According to this article, business leaders now think that the traditional, tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners kind of leadership belongs in the past. By contrast, today's corporate leader is expected to excel at teamwork, relationship building, negotiation and communications. This article went on to say that in the New Economy, those countries whose culture and values encourage col-

laboration are more likely to succeed in leadership positions. Canada, it concluded, is such a country.

In other words, in an increasingly diverse and complex world, the best way to succeed is not by trying to steamroll the competition. Working together is often a better way to get results.

To me, this shows that there are two competing views of leadership. One emphasizes the power to issue commands and rules, usually from a remote location. It regards involvement with others – especially competitors – as interference that only diminishes the power of the leader.

The other emphasizes collaboration. In this view, far from being diminished by working with the competition, leadership can be enhanced and strengthened by it.

Over the last decade, I have been involved in many debates about leadership. Now, as the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons – in a minority Parliament – I find myself in a unique position to test some of the ideas and see where theory meets practice.

The answer to the question “What kind of Leadership do we want in Parliament” depends on who you ask – or, perhaps, on how you look at democracy. Let me explain with an example based on personal experience.

Our government recently tabled its Speech from the Throne, followed by the Prime Minister's Address in Reply to it. Two opposition parties, the Conservatives and the Bloc Quebecois, proposed amendments. As a minority government, we had some hard choices to make.

There were some tense moments. At one point we were poised to hold a confidence vote on the amend-

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ments. But we worked hard with the other parties. We all met, talked and, in the end, found agreement on wording that satisfied them and met the government's objectives without compromising its core principles. Today, there is a sense among the parties that together we were able to demonstrate we can make this Parliament work.

Nevertheless, there is an alternate view, which says that we should have pushed ahead with the confidence vote and that working together with the opposition only serves to weaken the government. As House Leader it has been my job to lead many of these negotiations. So let me take this occasion to comment on how I think we should proceed.

In my view, the genius of democracy lies in its ability to help us live with our differences—and to do so respectfully. It is a way of making decisions on issues of the highest importance, when others around us—our family members, friends and neighbours—may disagree with our views.

Democracy does this through a two-step process. First, we discuss and debate our views. Ideally, we propose options and alternatives, we provide arguments and evidence and, in the process, we all listen and learn. Then we decide.

In Parliament, of course, this happens by a vote. In a Westminster system such as our own, a political party with a majority can gain control of this second step. When it does, it effectively controls Parliament.

What questions does this pose for our two views of leadership? If you believe that leadership is defined by who controls the most votes then the answer is clear. All that really matters is whether or not I have the power to decide. If I do, you do not. If I share some of it with you, my power as a leader is diminished. Looked at this way, the logic of power is brutally simple—as is the kind of leadership that follows from it.

But now let me shift back to the first stage of democracy: deliberation and debate. Suppose that I have more power than you. Suppose that I am part of a majority government that has the votes to ensure the final decision. If the debate and discussion between us is meaningful—if I really listen to you—it may change how I think. It may even change how I use the power that I have.

So, while you may not have the power to decide, you can still have some influence over me. But that is possible only if I am willing to listen to you and seriously consider what you say.

It is this basic belief that democracy is about listening to one another—even when the number of votes is in someone's favour—that makes it so appealing. It allows us to accept the final decision as legitimate, even when it

goes against our views. It allows us to live with our differences—and to do so respectfully.

There is nothing in democracy, however, that forces us to talk and listen to one another. It is a choice and a commitment that each party and each individual must make, if democracy is to be anything more than the quest for power.

Even in countries with a long history of democracy, this does not come easily. It must be cultivated, practiced, learned and reinforced. We are all very much part of a tradition in which leadership has been practiced as a game of control. We all need to contribute, if we are going to change that.

Leadership in A Minority Government

This brings me to the subject of minority governments—one on which, I am fast becoming an expert.

Canadians have decided that this Parliament will be governed by a minority. Although I might have preferred otherwise, I fully accept that judgment. But what lesson should we learn from it?

In my view Canadians want Parliament to be about more than the quest for power. They want to see that debate is meaningful and that we are listening to one another when we engage in it. They want to see more collaboration and less confrontation.

Finding myself in the situation of managing a minority government is proving very instructive. Most of the House's activity must be negotiated beforehand. It is not always easy. There are times when I would prefer to say to my colleagues across the table: "Take it or leave it!" rather than "What do you think?"

Believe me, "What do you think?" can be a lot harder. The opposition parties often have very different views from those of our government. As a result, even at the best of times, governing with a minority can be a trying and messy business. But overall there are fewer surprises, procedural shenanigans, and games, at least for now. People have to agree to make it work.

Still, let me be very clear: If anyone thinks that this means that we do not have a bottom line, they are wrong. As a government, we have an agenda based on a substantive policy direction. We have goals. We fought an election campaign on them. And we will stand by them.

So, yes, I am listening to the opposition—and so is the government I represent. But I regard that as a gain for Canadians—and I think that they will too.

This brings me back to the question of working together with the opposition: Should it be seen as a sign of weakness? As you may have guessed, I disagree with that view.

It is based in a view of leadership that I reject — one that sees Parliament as little more than a game of power and who controls it. From this angle, our success as a government will be judged by whether we can get our agenda through without “blinking” or “caving in” or “backing down” or some other of a dozen tired metaphors.

From where I stand, this is just wrong. I have metaphors too — ones that I think do a much better job of explaining what we are trying to do, like “finding a balance,” “looking for middle ground” or just plain “working together.”

From my perspective, what looks like an effort to make room for other voices may look to others like weakness or having no bottom line. As always, so much depends on how we choose to see things.

Interestingly, some commentators have taken the opposite view from the one I just discussed. They think that Parliament is working remarkably well — so well, in fact, that they may wonder why we would ever want a majority government.

My answer is this: While we are learning from this experience — and that is a good thing — the right lesson to draw here is not that minorities are better than majorities. It is rather that collaboration is better than confrontation.

Moreover, there is a cost that comes with minority governments and we should recognize it. Let me remind you that there are deep differences between the views of our government and those of the other parties. In a minority situation, we must be careful about how far we tread into this territory.

That means that it is more difficult for us as a minority government to pursue some of the goals that I believe a majority of Canadians support.

For the moment, however, we must accept that they have a higher priority. They have signaled the parties in Parliament that they want them to learn to work together better.

Our government accepts that judgment. The challenge that it poses for us is to take steps that will help change the culture. Changing our views around leadership is a very important part of that.

Over the last ten years, I have been a part of many discussions about how to make Parliament more democratic. My colleagues and I have debated procedures and rules, processes and practices of all sorts — sometimes late into the night. While I certainly would not want to say that the exercise has been unhelpful, I see now — every day — that it does not get to the heart of things.

In the first instance, democracy is not about rules and procedures. First and foremost, it is about voice. Democracy works when people feel that their voice counts — that it is being listened to — in the political process, whether as a citizen or as a parliamentarian.

This brings me to my central point. Far from being a weakness, collaboration should be recognized as a core value in a democracy. It is one that I have made part of my bottom line in politics. Indeed, I think the central message that Canadians sent in the last election is that all parties had better do the same.

Notes

1. "Canadian team builders turn U.S. heads", *Globe and Mail*, August 28th, 2000.