



Parliamentary Book Shelf

Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis by Peter H. Russell and Lorne Sossin, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2009

The political crisis of late 2008 was perhaps the longest week ever in Canadian politics. But with remarkable speed, we now have a comprehensive academic study on those incredible events.

Peter Russell and Lorne Sossin's new edited book, *Parliamentary Democracy in Crisis*, is a timely and authoritative collection of papers on all aspects of the crisis.

Sixteen leading experts on Canadian politics and the constitution address all aspects of the December 2008 political crisis. Did the Governor-General do the right thing? What would a coalition government be like? Why did so many Canadians believe that no one could replace the "elected" Conservative government? These and other questions are all addressed in this book, with the depth and insight so lacking at the time of crisis.

One of the key themes of the book is that the events of December were the culmination of pressures that had been building for some time and, as Gary Levy says, this crisis was "not made in a day." Minority governments, change and turnover in political parties, and increasingly polarized parliamentary proceedings have all produced new tensions and pressures in the parliamentary system.

Since 2004 we have seen

dramatic votes over motions of confidence, constant brinkmanship between party leaders, new Senate proposals, high-profile floor-crossers, and a widespread sense of breakdown in the Commons committee system – not to mention three general elections. All this has pushed and pulled the system to new extremes. But in the view of the editors and at least some of the authors, "ultimately the system worked" (the title of David Cameron's chapter) and the essential durability of our parliamentary system was proved again.

The book strives "to reduce the knowledge deficit" (xiv) and contribute scholarly yet accessible understandings of Canadian constitutional and parliamentary institutions. A great concern of the contributors is that the crisis showed how uninformed or dangerously ill-informed many Canadians are about our institutions and their conventions. The government is not "elected" directly by Canadians. Coalition governments are neither illegal nor unprecedented in Canada. The authors provide context, background and analysis that clarifies much of the confusion. Particularly useful is Michael Valpy's chronicle of the crisis narrative, which will help us now and in the future to remember exactly what happened.

This is not to say the authors agree. In particular, there is a lively debate on the key question of whether the Governor-General

did the right thing. C.E.S. Franks argues that regardless of the merit of Mr. Harper's request, to refuse prorogation risked splitting the country in multiple ways. The Governor-General weighed her options, and ultimately made the right decision.

But Andrew Heard argues that "the governor-general was not bound by her normal duty to act on the prime minister's advice" which was "unconstitutional," (55) and says the granting of prorogation sets a dangerous precedent in which "future prime ministers can claim they are entitled to suspend Parliament at any time, for any reason." (60). Other writers do not necessarily challenge the vice-regal decision, but Jean Leclair and Jean-Francois Gaudreault-DesBiens argue that the crisis shows the potentially "shaky" (117) nature of the institution, and Sossin and Adam Dodek suggest a more transparent process in which governors-general might justify their decisions in writing rather than remaining silent.

On coalition government, the contributors are unanimous about its basic legitimacy, but less about the specific Liberal-NDP proposal. Lawrence LeDuc and Graham White both point out that coalitions are virtually the norm in many parliamentary democracies, and can be highly stable and democratic. In fact, White argues that a coalition would have been a beneficial jolt to Canadian parliamentary democracy, moving "beyond

the unsatisfactory status quo that has immobilized and neutered Parliament for far too long... does anyone seriously think that Parliament ain't broke?"(150-51). But Grace Skogstad points out the lopsided regional nature of the proposed coalition and the absence of the party that garnered the most votes in the last election, and argues that the outcry especially among many Western Canadians "should not be interpreted as a rejection of all coalition governments."(164).

Ultimately, the authors are all concerned that the crisis has left too many issues hanging, and in Peter Russell's words, "the lack of political consensus on fundamental principles of our constitution poses a serious threat to the stability of our parliamentary democracy."(148) They are particularly

concerned with the arguments of Mr. Harper and his advisors that a coalition was illegitimate and that Canadians had somehow directly elected a prime minister and government. On the other hand, Russell argues, the crisis and discussions allow us "to bring those spooky unwritten constitutional conventions down from the attic...and try to see if we can pin them down in a matter than is politically consensual and popularly accessible."(148). Not all authors might agree that such pinning down is possible, but there is a strong belief that more needs to be done to explain and illuminate the workings of our system of constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government.

And this book makes exactly that contribution. Space does not allow us to mention all the

authors and chapters, but the subject matter will be particularly interesting to readers of *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, and the mix of topics means something for everyone (though everyone should be interested in every chapter!). The volume is particularly welcome for teaching. Even before the crisis erupted, we have been seriously short of current work on the Governor-General or coalition governments, and this will make a valuable text or reader. The editors, authors and publisher are to be commended for quickly producing such an important and illuminating volume on one of the most memorable weeks in Canadian political history.

Jonathan Malloy

Department of Political Science
Carleton University