



A CANADIAN LESSON FOR A CONSERVATIVE MINORITY GOVERNMENT

Dr Patrick Basham

London (7 May 2010) – For 13 years, your political ambitions were frustrated by a centre-left party that dominated national government and coasted to victory at three successive elections. Now, with the possibility of a Tory parliamentary majority, you stay up all night to realise your dream. But the majority doesn't materialise and, in the cold light of day, the result's deeply unsatisfying, even unsettling.

Sure, the Conservative party you've led out of the electoral wilderness is the clear winner in terms of both popular vote and seats in the House of Commons, but the left-of-centre parties collectively secured more votes and now have more seats. Furthermore, both nationalist and separatist parties have secured significant representation, which makes cross-party alliances that much harder to envisage.

And the polls are clear on one thing: your party's first-place finish reflects the electorate's indictment of the incumbent party rather than an endorsement of your party's manifesto.

A summary of David Cameron's past 24 hours in political no-man's land?

No. This was the experience of Stephen Harper, then-leader of Canada's Opposition Conservative party, on Election Day in January 2006, immediately before Harper became Prime Minister at the head of a minority government.

The experiences and lessons of Canada's Conservatives are a valuable model for British Conservatives as Cameron today took the first step towards acquiring the keys to No 10 Downing St.

Stephen Harper didn't strike a formal deal with any of the other parties. Following Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin's resignation, Harper demonstrated leadership the best way a politician can – by actually leading.

Having *first* taken the reins of power, Harper then set about trying to make things work out. Occupying the prime ministerial seat at the very least buys one some time to figure out how to, or if one even can, govern. Just ask Gordon Brown or Peter Mandelson.

Critically, Harper's Conservatives appreciated that their ideological reach exceeded their parliamentary grasp. Hence, out of necessity they governed with their philosophical sails trimmed, as moderate budgets and other major pieces of legislation were passed with the support of differing combinations of MPs (including choreographed abstentions) from the Opposition benches on an issue-by-issue basis.

All things considered, Harper's minority government posted a fairly decent record of accomplishment, including spending restraint, modest tax cuts, and public sector borrowing reductions. This dynamic lasted for almost three years before the Prime Minister called an election in the autumn of 2008, which his party duly won, again with a plurality of seats.

Tellingly, when the global financial crisis hit the Canadian economy, the ensuing recession was far shallower and more short-lived than either in Gordon Brown's Britain or in Barack Obama's America, both of whom printed, borrowed, and spent public funds to a far greater extent than their Canadian counterpart.

The first Canadian lesson is that a Conservative minority government may prove to be a parliamentary minefield but it doesn't have to be electoral quicksand for Cameron's party.

More importantly, the second lesson is a Conservative minority government does not inherently portend bad tidings for the British economy, or the country at large. If a Prime Minister Cameron is sensible, both the Right and the Centre of the British electorate can be pleased, if not always appeased.

However, if things go downhill after going it alone, Cameron can always fall back upon the longstanding political advice given to unpopular leaders by the characters of *South Park*: "Blame Canada!"

###

Patrick Basham is the director of the Democracy Institute and a Cato Institute adjunct scholar. He has advised Canadian parties and parliamentary candidates and serves as a political analyst for Canadian radio and television.