Harper's assault on democracy | rabble.ca

rabble.ca columnist Murray Dobbin details the harm Prime Minister Stephen Harper is doing to the political and social fabric of Canada in a new essay commissioned by [The Council of Canadians](). This article is an excerpt taken from the essay, the first in a 10-part series on Harper's assault on democracy.

An introduction

On Jan. 23, 2010, thousands of Canadians in over 60 towns and cities demonstrated their anger over the shutting down of Canada's Parliament by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. At the same time, over 220,000 Canadians also joined a Facebook protest called Canadians Against the Prorogation of Parliament.

It was the second time the prime minister had summarily locked the doors to the people's house -- the House of Commons. It was clear to most commentators, including columnists and editorial writers normally sympathetic to the Harper government, that the reasons for the shutdown were purely partisan: it ended the opposition's persistent and effective questioning about the government's complicity in the torture of Afghan "detainees" in the first years of the Afghan war. And prorogation would also allow Harper to appoint five new senators unopposed, and, more importantly, dissolve the current senate committees and form new ones with Conservative majorities.

This cynical move by Harper was preceded by two other less dramatic assaults on democracy: the government's refusal to obey a parliamentary resolution demanding documents related to the Afghan investigation, and the decision by the Conservative members of the parliamentary committee investigating the issue to boycott the hearings, thus bringing the process to a halt.

Something happened with this latest expression of disdain for democracy. It was the last straw. If it is true that Canadians are slow to anger then the outpouring of rage at Harper's move demonstrated that they finally had enough. It turns out that Canadians actually care a great deal about democracy and as arcane as the word is, they had no trouble figuring out that "prorogue" means to shut down, to suspend, and in this case it meant the government trying to escape the consequences of its actions.

Just days after the demonstrations, a report by the Institute of Wellbeing -- the "Democratic Engagement Report" -- revealed what the authors called "a huge democratic deficit." The report reinforced the spontaneous outpouring of anger at the shutting down of Parliament. "At a time when people are demanding greater accountability and transparency, they see their government institutions becoming more remote and opaque. Too many Canadians feel that their voices are not being heard; that their efforts to influence government policy are ignored..."

Harper's contempt for what Canada had become led directly to his contempt for democracy (this is, after all, what produced the things he hates) and his willingness to subvert democracy any time it frustrates his long-term goal: to dismantle the Canada that three generations of Canadians have built. This is his ultimate goal -- not to govern, not be the leader of a political party, not even to be the prime minister. These are simply the necessary steps on the way to achieving the power necessary to undo what past governments have accomplished. He is the only prime minister in Canadian history to openly detest his own country: its efforts at egalitarianism, its social programs, it wealth redistribution, its peacekeeping history internationally, its attempts at promoting and preserving its unique culture.

Harper has made this clear on numerous occasions and by the career choices he has made outside politics. He once quit federal politics in frustration to head up the National Citizens Coalition, the most rightwing lobby group in the country (motto: "More freedom through less government"), which was formed in the late 1960s to fight Medicare. On Dec. 8, 2000, when he was president of the NCC, Harper told The National Post: "Canada appears content to become a second-tier socialistic country, boasting ever more loudly about its economy and social services to mask its second-rate status."

In a speech to a rightwing American think-tank, The Council for National Policy, in June 1997, Harper ridiculed all Canadians: "I was asked to speak about Canadian politics... it's legendary that if you're like all Americans, you know almost nothing except about your own country. Which makes you probably knowledgeable about one more country than most Canadians." The whole speech was full of such insults and sarcasm about his own country, its political system and other political parties.

Indeed, the prime minister doesn't seem to accept that there a separate, distinct Canadian nation. Harper was asked in a

1997 CBC interview, "Is there a Canadian culture?" He replied: "Yes, in a very loose sense. It consists of regional cultures within Canada -- regional cultures that cross borders with the U.S. We're part of a worldwide Anglo-American culture. And there is a continental culture." Harper simply cannot accept or acknowledge the things that make Canada unique -- and different -- from the United States.

This is the only plausible explanation of his openly anti-democratic behaviour and policies. Preoccupied with that goal of turning back Canadian social democracy, Harper the master strategist is constantly calculating every step toward that objective.

This study is intended to examine the most serious violations of democracy committed by the prime minister and his government. Taken as a whole they add up to a dangerous undermining of our democratic traditions, institutions and precedents -- and politics.

Social engineering from the right

One of the most popular concepts on the political right over the years has been the notion of "social engineering." The phrase is intended to describe a process by which liberals and the left "engineer" society - that is, set out to remake it -- by implementing government programs, intervening in the economy, and redistributing wealth so that there is a measure of economic equality (in a system defined by inequality). The implication is that these changes were undemocratic -- imposed by politicians, intellectuals and bureaucrats.

Yet rightwing social engineering is exactly what Stephen Harper intends to do, and has already done in many ways. We are now a far more militarized culture than when he came to office four years ago -- with an aggressive "war-fighting" military. Our foreign policy is now in lock-step with the U.S. This has never been debated in Parliament nor has the Conservative Party actually run on such policies. In spite of the fact of widespread support for new social programs like universal child care and Pharmacare, such programs are ruled out by the Harper government. While his minority government status has so far prevented an assault on Medicare and the Canada Health Act, Harper is on record as supporting increased privatization and two-tier Medicare.

This is true social engineering if by that term we mean the illegitimate remaking of Canadian society and governance. When all the social programs and activist government programs that the prime minister objects to were implemented there was widespread public support for them. Governments were responding to social movements demanding these things: unemployment insurance, Medicare, subsidized university education, Family Allowances, public pensions, old age security. These programs were not imposed by a cabal of liberal and socialist intellectuals and bureaucrats -- they were rooted in the expressed values of Canadians.

Harper's determination to remake Canada in the image of unregulated capitalism is illegitimate because it aims at dismantling what decades of democratic engagement has created. It is even more outrageous given the fact this fundamental shift is being undertaken by a government which received support from less 23 per cent of the eligible voters in Canada. Canadians have not changed their minds about these programs and values - if anything support has been reinforced by the perceived threats to these gains. These things are the fruits of democracy -- its ultimate litmus test. Harper's plan to rid the country of this legitimate evolution of social and economic change is true social engineering, and profoundly anti-democratic.

While the prime minister has a minority government he cannot fundamentally change the country's direction through legislation as the opposition can vote him down. But the quirks of minority governments allow him to control spending regarding any program and he does not have to raise the question in the House of Commons at all. That means that he can keep legislation on the books establishing various institutions but in effect make them disappear by cancelling their budgets, as he did with Law Commission of Canada. Eliminating the LCC was an important policy decision that arguably should have been the subject of debate in the House -- eliminating it by cancelling its budget was legal, but not democratic.

There are numerous examples of Harper using his control of the purse strings of government, engaging in rightwing social engineering. One of the most prominent examples is his attack on culture -- a favourite target of rightwing regimes. The Bush administration also attacked culture in the U.S. because writers, filmmakers, playwrights and artists are often the most effective social critics. In Canada, governments have always played a major role in funding the arts. But in the run-up to the Nov. 2008 federal election, Harper announced $40 million in cuts to Canadian arts programs. In the short term, it backfired -- costing Harper many seats in Quebec which takes culture more seriously than anywhere else in Canada. But the cuts were not reversed and the country will change as a result. While $40 million does not sound like much it sustained thousands of cultural workers, and funded thousands of artistic creations

reflecting the country.

Another target of Harper's engineering is pure science. The Jan. 28, 2009 budget implemented huge cuts to three of the most important and prestigious grant-making agencies in the country -- the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. A large percentage of scientists and academics working in Canada rely these agencies to fund their research. The budgets were reduced collectively by $113 million over the following three years. Genome Canada was expecting approximately $120 million to kick-start new international research projects (some led by Canadian researchers). Instead there was no mention of the project - and no money. The government also implemented $35 million in cuts to the National Research Council, one of the oldest such bodies in Canada and one of the most highly respected science agencies in the world.

Why Harper would attack science in this manner (he massively increased spending on physical infrastructure for science institutes and universities) was not revealed. In the U.S., the Obama administration is putting billions into exactly the kind of research the prime minister is cutting -- citing the need to be internationally competitive. But the fundamentalist political base of the Conservative Party is openly hostile to science and Harper's Minister of State for Science and Technology, Gary Goodyear, is an evangelical Christian. Asked if he believed in evolution, Goodyear replied: "I'm not going to answer that question. I am a Christian, and I don't think anybody asking a question about my religion is appropriate." Months after the cuts, the Genome Project announced it was forced to abandon its participation in an international stem-cell research project -- research opposed by evangelicals.

Another area targeted by Harper for re-engineering was the whole area of women's rights and equality and, more broadly, the defence and enhancement of human rights (see below for more details). Both these social developments in Canada over the past 40 years have been denounced and resisted by the same Christian fundamentalist community that is the core voter base for the Harper Conservatives, as it was for the party's predecessor, the Reform Party.

The Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) described its mission this way: "... to create knowledge and lead public dialogue and discussion on social and economic issues important to the well-being of all Canadians Through more than 700 publications, CPRN's work touches on many of the major socio-economic challenges facing Canadian society. We analyze important public policy issues in health care, supports to families, learning opportunities, job quality, and sustainable cities and communities." It was ranked as the most influential policy institute in Canada. The CPRN also led Canadian research institutes in its in-depth values surveys of Canadians -- surveys that showed Canadians to be highly supportive of activist government, democracy and social programs. It was recognized as a "champion of citizen engagement." The Harper government eliminated its funding. On Oct. 29, 2009, it was forced to close its doors.

Combining just these examples it is hard not to conclude that Stephen Harper wants to try to remake Canada at least partially in the image of Christian fundamentalism -- a country devoid of modern culture, hostile to science, disdainful of human rights and dedicated to reducing the role of government and pubic engagement in democracy.

Treating minority government status as a mandate

Prime ministers in Canada govern at the pleasure of Parliament, not the other way round. Everyone understands intuitively that if you have a minority government you must co-operate with the other parties and compromise, or persuade them to your way of thinking. That's what minority means. But from the day in 2006 that Stephen Harper achieved his status as prime minister he has treated this underlying principle with contempt. Once in power, it seems that Harper forgot that only 38 per cent of voters voted for his party and that 62 per cent voted against him and explicitly for the other parties in the House of Commons. For Harper, once he got his hands on state power he was determined to use it even if that meant running roughshod over the rules of Parliament.

As we will see below, the prime minister's determination to use his power would see him demonstrate contempt for virtually every aspect of Canada's democratic institutions, traditions and precedents, the majority of Canadians who did not vote for him, the opposition political parties with legitimacy equal to his own, for the various watchdog agencies tasked with making our system of government transparent and accountable, for the media, for his own MPs and cabinet ministers and for institutions of Parliament other than the House of Commons - the Senate and House Standing Committees. He treats the checks and balances of Canada's political system as somehow perverse and unacceptable impediments to his agenda.

John Adams, one of the founding fathers of the United States, expressed a fundamental value of democracy this way: "[We shall have] a government of laws, not men." This statement simply affirms what we know intuitively -- that those

who exercise power over us are not free to do anything they wish with the power we temporarily and conditionally assign to them. They are subject to limits set by law. And they are bound by the principles of democracy not to use their power to pursue personal agendas or vendettas.

Harper can be seen as a classic example of what Adams was implicitly warning about. His is a government of men, not laws -- doing whatever he wishes, regardless of democratic tradition and convention and historical precedent. It is for this reason that many commentators have rightly identified Harper as a radical and not a genuine conservative.

Harper's model government: Alberta's one-party state

Harper's ideological approach to politics and his contempt for parliament are exacerbated by another feature peculiar to this Alberta-based politician. He has always admired the way things are done in Alberta and once wrote a commentary in The National Post proposing that Alberta put up a "firewall" around the province to protect it from the federal government.

Alberta has for decades been effectively a one-party state. While the Conservatives (and Social Credit before them) don't get all the votes in elections, they get the vast majority of the seats and the meaningful political debates take place within the governing party and the cabinet -- not between the government and the opposition. Politicians who want to exercise power join the Conservatives. If there is a precedent for Harper's pernicious attitude towards democracy, it is found in Alberta, where the government demonstrates some of the characteristics of a monarchy: an entitlement to rule and an arrogant disdain for dissent.

As William Neville, a former Progressive Conservative, pointed out in a Winnipeg Free Press commentary on Harper's latest prorogation:

"Harper's office sent a memorandum to all its parliamentary supporters listing all the wonderful things that ministers, Conservative MPs and senators are doing - and, by implication, able to do -- because Parliament is not sitting. Essentially, Harper is suggesting that government gets better the less Parliament does."

That argument was made explicit by no less an authority than one of Harper's senior ministers. Jason Kenney, who holds the portfolio for Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, commented on Jan. 23, 2010, "As a minister, I often get more done when the House is not in session."

Alberta's one-party state government is an aberration in Canada and in most English-speaking parliamentary systems -- but at least in Alberta, governments achieve a large plurality of votes in elections.

Part two of Murray Dobbin's series is on the implications of the two prorogations of Parliament. It will be published tomorrow, March 4, to coincide with the federal budget and the reconvening of Parliament. The results are due out shortly of a major poll by Environics on proportional representation, made for The Council of Canadians.