

ECONEWS

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Promoting the Vision of a Sustainable Vancouver Island

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RESTORING DEMOCRACY in CANADA

Dear Michael, Jack, Gilles and Elizabeth,

This letter comes with New Year's greetings from myself, and millions of Canadians who think alike. Together, you represent the political preference of the large majority - 60% to 65% - of voting Canadians.

Our Canadian democracy has fallen into a dark and lugubrious funk. The chief rationale of having a democracy is that we should be governed by a party or parties that represent a majority of the voting citizens - and yet here in Canada, this is not happening, causing a permanent political sulkiness.

Our government in Ottawa is not democratically legitimate - and yet this is the government that is foot-dragging on international action on climate change, boosting the Alberta tar sands, and arbitrarily proroguing Parliament. This ends the Afghanistan torture, while conveniently giving time to appoint enough new senators to create a Conservative majority in the unelected Senate, locking in their influence for years to come.

It weakens the dignity of all Canadians to be ruled in such a manner. There is a direct line that can be traced from our 'skunk of the world' reputation on climate change to our being governed like this.

We are a nation in distress - which is why our flag is shown flying upside down. And yet, as polite Canadians, we swallow our distress far too passively.

The situation has arisen because no party is able to control a majority of the seats in Ottawa. This is common in many European countries however, and in no instance do they end up being governed as we are.

In most of Europe, when the party with the most MPs does not win a majority, the accepted protocol is that they seek partners who will work with them in a coalition. If they fail, the

leader with the next largest number of MPs does the same until a coalition government emerges that is supported by a majority of MPs.

Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Pakistan, India, Kenya - they all have coalition governments.



No one is suggesting that a coalition is necessarily the best way to govern a country - all forms of democracy are messy, and have inevitable crises. But in Canada, right now, a coalition may be the only way in which we can have a democratically elected government that represents a majority of Canadians.

This letter is an open appeal to you to meet together and agree on the principles on which you would work together in a new government, and start the task of normalizing the idea of a coalition government here in Canada, just as they do in Europe.

None of your parties is going to disappear; the values represented by the Liberals, the New Democrats, the Greens and the Bloc Quebecois are all important - yet it may be years before a majority party emerges again in Canada. It is time for all Canadians to get used to the idea of a coalition government.

A few lessons from Europe may be helpful, drawn from a March 2009 conference organized by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung that brought together scholars and MPs for a dialogue about the nature of coalitions.

* Coalition governments are rarely announced in advance. They are negotiated once the will of the voters is known. The parties do, however, make it known which parties they would be willing to negotiate with, and which they would not.

* The process of building a coalition is open and transparent. In Germany, the 'grand coalition' that ruled from 2005 to 2008 had a 190-page contract that laid down the terms of their partnership. Speed and secrecy create suspicion and hostility.

Our dilemma is the tradition, seemingly accepted by the Governor General, that the party with the most seats is entitled to form a government even if it does *not* command the confidence of the majority of MPs.

There is nothing in the Canadian constitution that says this is the Canadian Way. Wikipedia's anonymous editor states, "the Governor General must draw from the Privy Council an individual to act as Prime Minister - in almost all cases the Member of Parliament who commands the confidence of the House of Commons."

It is my belief that the legitimacy of the manner by which the Governor General is somehow empowered to invite a government to be formed that does *not* command the confidence of the House needs to be questioned openly and formally, in a public debate.

The future of Canada as a country of moral standing in the world is at stake. We are growing ashamed to be Canadians on the international stage - and all because we are being governed in this undemocratic manner.

The crises of our time are far too urgent to be held hostage by a government that does not represent the majority of Canadians. You have the power to change this. On behalf of so many of us - please do.

Guy Dauncey