

THE GOVERNMENT'S AGENDA WILL RADICALLY SHIFT AFTER JUNE 28



DAVID ZUSSMAN

In seven days, Canadians likely will choose a minority government, the first in 25 years. Depending on Paul Martin's political acumen and the distribution of seats and popular vote, the actual winner of the election might not be obvious for some time after election day. Nevertheless, the outcome is likely to produce an interesting agenda when Parliament meets for the first time in the late summer or early fall.

Based on what Canadians have been sharing with candidates, researchers, and journalists for the past five weeks, there are a few issues that are

likely to become priorities in the upcoming parliamentary session.

Canadians are angry with politicians and no longer trust that they are always acting in the public interest. Moreover, voters have become even more frustrated when they have felt that electoral promises have been unrealistic or simply designed to deceive. As a result, Canadians are likely to feel very comfortable with the notion that they will be governed by a government that needs to find consensus (and a measure of civility) among competing political parties. In essence, voters have been telling candidates that, in general, they are content with the overall state of the economy, have concerns about some policy areas, are distrustful of elected officials and want more controls over their behaviour.

While same-sex marriage and abortion served as useful

wedge issues during the election, it is not likely that the new Parliament will revisit them as that could shatter whatever fragile *entente* is negotiated among the parties. Instead, the session likely will be dominated by attempts to remedy the health-care system, implement institutional reform, enlarge the role of MPs, define Canada's place in the world and open up the appointment process.

Weaknesses in our current health-care system have dominated the election campaign as each of the political parties has put forward only vague ideas for maintaining our publicly funded system. As Roy Romanow and Michael Kirby already noted in their wide-ranging reports on our health-care system, the current way in which we deliver health care in Canada is not sustainable under current conditions. As a result, the heightened expecta-

tions created by the election campaign likely will pressure the newly elected government to develop proposals for four specific aspects of our health-care system: waiting times, pharmacare, home care and the improved delivery of health services.

This election has also created voter demand for institutional reform. In particular, tales of government misspending and the lack of adequate accountability have scarred citizens. As a result, we can expect that Parliament will look at making a number of significant and symbolic changes in governance.

For example, conflict of interest rules for cabinet ministers and backbench MPs are likely to be tightened and made more transparent. It is also likely that the new government will dust off the electoral reform studies conducted more than a decade ago to discover whether any of the proposals have any more

resonance with parliamentarians today.

Another institutional change will be a greater role for the auditor general. While it is unlikely that the new government will accept the Conservative party's commitment to increase the auditor general's budget by \$100 million, program evaluation studies are going to become more important.

Ways to enhance the role of members of Parliament are likely to be broadened beyond those Mr. Martin brought in earlier this year. More free votes, more active committees with elected chairs and larger budgets are going to radically improve backbench MPs' ability to hold governments to account.

In policy terms, the government is likely to concentrate on a few areas beyond health care where voters have expressed a desire for action. First, Canadians want a better definition of the role Canada is going to play

in the world. In concrete terms, this means deciding on military spending, peacekeeping activities and a strategy that gives expression to our preference for multilateral action.

Finally, our new federal government is likely to be confronted with redefining two critical sets of relationships within the Canadian federation. First, the prime minister will be asked to address the relative importance of the federal, provincial and municipal governments in addressing the fiscal imbalance among the three orders of government. The prime minister will also be under considerable pressure to allow the provinces to actively participate in the appointment of senators and Supreme Court judges.

DAVID ZUSSMAN is chief operating officer at EKOS Research Associates and a professor of management at the University of Ottawa. E-mail: dzussman@ekos.com