

A MINORITY GOVERNMENT'S CHALLENGES



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One thing that experts have emphasized since the federal election on June 28 is that minority governments can work, in the sense that they can be productive and responsive to citizens' needs. Former prime minister Lester Pearson demonstrated in the 1960s that minority governments could also be activist ones under certain circumstances. One of the reasons for this is that opposition parties have a unique opportunity to contribute to the policy agenda since they are in a very powerful position to add their political support to policy initiatives that are consistent with their methodology.

With so many new potential policy interveners (both from the left and the right side of the political spectrum), there is every reason to expect that the upcoming parliament will be active, and potentially very exciting.

With this in mind, later this week Prime Minister Paul Martin will gather around him a select group of colleagues to be sworn in as the new cabinet of the 38th Parliament. The minority-government situation will affect, in a consider-

able way, the cabinet selection process, the role of the public service and the functioning of the central nervous system of the government — the Prime Ministers Office and the Privy Council Office.

Concerning cabinet-making, the PM needs to replace six colleagues who were defeated in the June election, or restructure the cabinet responsibilities in order to function without them.

As Mr. Martin considers the makeup of his new team, several features of a minority government will affect his choices. First, minority governments have a tendency to force the party in charge to share power with a wider variety of players than is typically the case in majority government situations. The new power-sharing now includes the opposition parties, the Senate and the provinces. As a result, the cabinet will have to contain people who are effective at consultation and consensus-seeking.

Second, major events in the life of a government, such as the speech from the throne and the budget take on greater importance and are more difficult to craft because so many new players are injected into the deliberations and have more of a say in the outcome. Hence, an ability to manage this complex process will be a key qualifier for a cabinet position.

Finally, members of Parliament from all parties will likely have a greater say in the fate of proposed legislation, not only because of the precarious nature of

minority governments but more significantly because of the loosened party discipline rules that the prime minister introduced last December. This means that caucus management will have to be a major preoccupation of the House leader, who will need to be especially adroit at controlling empowered members of Parliament.

As for the role of public servants, a minority government will require them to develop a new working style that recognizes the precarious nature of the decision-making process that will include parliamentarians from three other political parties. For example, the public service will have to be far

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more sensitive to the public's assessment of government policy proposals, especially those that have a rural dimension. The government will be vulnerable in these areas given their poor showing in certain regions of the country.

On the policy side, health was the No. 1 election issue for a number of the parties as it is for the provinces and the public. As a result, we should expect the public service to be tasked with devel-

oping new policy options (including a full costing algorithm) for the upcoming meeting on health care between the PM and the premiers. Since all of the options will require health funding, the public service can look forward to another cost-saving exercise such as a formal "program review" along the lines of the one developed by Marcel Masse and Paul Martin in 1994.

There are, however, a number of organizational and administrative measures the government could undertake at the centre that would ease the natural tensions that will arise as the government balances implementing its policy agenda and surviving as a government. These include simplifying the current cabinet decision-making process that is too complicated at present; sharpening the roles and responsibilities of senior PMO staff so that interlocutors know who is responsible for what; and settling on a few government priorities at a time to help the public service concentrate its efforts on the key issues.

The first six months of the Martin government were difficult ones. The move from campaigning to governing was a challenge for his team and the auditor general's report took the government in a different direction from the one it had planned.

That said, the team around Mr. Martin has already experienced, in a very short period, the full range of governing challenges — transition, speech from the throne, budget, and election — so the lessons learned earlier this year should benefit the management team going forward.

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