

At least the rest of us have Festivus

Looming election about nothing

And no one really wants it anyway

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OTTAWA—At the *Toronto Star*, as was undoubtedly the case at other media outlets this week, election preparation began in earnest.

It didn't start with any great surge of enthusiasm. In fact, it required some suspension of incredulity. Here it was, barely a month before the Christmas and New Year's holidays, and an election may soon be upon us. Campaign coverage plans that were put away after last spring's political hijinks are being hauled out of storage, right along with the tangled garlands and twinkly lights.

Why? Well, unless someone pulls back from the brink pretty soon on Parliament Hill, Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberal government will collapse on or around Nov. 28, forcing him to call an election that will probably be held Jan. 16 or Jan. 23. That's almost two whole months of campaigning to be unleashed on a reluctant nation.

At one point in the *Star's* planning session, heard over the conference call, someone sensible asked: "What's this election about?"

Quizzical silence was the reply. As it turns out, that might be the most correct answer. Consider the situation under which this election might take place:

- The government doesn't want an election.
- The opposition doesn't want an election.
- The Canadian public, more or less, depending on which polls you read, doesn't want an election.
- Most ludicrous of all, the whole process that will lead to this election begins from an attempt in the Commons to thwart a holiday-time election.

No wonder that the denizens of Parliament Hill, looking for pop-culture metaphors to describe this scenario, have moved right past the Christmas symbols and straight to *Seinfeld*, the famous TV show about nothing.

Actually, though, the best analogy may be found in a hybrid of the two comparisons: Festivus, the fictional Yule-time holiday created by Frank Costanza, George's dad, in one memorable episode of *Seinfeld*.

Created in protest against the prevailing sentiments of the season, Festivus celebrations included such heartwarming family rites as "feats of strength" and "airing of grievances." For most of its celebrants, particularly George, Festivus was downright embarrassing, if not humiliating.

Good grief, as another Christmas-holiday-special character might say. Festivus is already upon us.

Somehow, though, this is strangely fitting and, let's not forget, kind of funny. But more seriously, at some point, it may turn out that an election about nothing is an ideal platform to reflect on the larger sense of "nothingness" that pervades federal politics, if not the whole federal government these days.

What's at issue here? Nothing short of relevance. Start from the scenario that could launch this election: four seemingly powerful political parties, the mighty Liberals, Conservatives, New Democrats and Bloc Québécois, powerless to prevent an election no one wants. Does that say good things about any of these parties' abilities to lead a nation?

But let's also keep in mind what gave rise to this alleged crisis on Parliament Hill: a federal Liberal sponsorship scandal that had its beginnings in Ottawa's desire to boost its presence, and by extension, its relevance, in Quebec.

Lost in all the sound and fury has been any serious examination of whether that was a good idea at all. People who fundamentally believe in federal government might have justifiable fears that the whole concept of Ottawa as a force for good has been corroded by a ham-handed attempt to sell that view through the most cynical means of sponsorship and advertising-program abuse.

Equally worrying, though, is the view that Ottawa's irrelevance is a product of sheer time and erosion and neglect.

What happens if our federal government is pointless?

There are those with short memories or scores to settle who say that this unbearable lightness of federal being began with Martin and his multiple-priority regime, coming to power in late 2003, quickly striving to be all things to everyone and, ultimately, zero in sum, after all the various policies and directions cancelled each other out.

Older hands around Ottawa might argue that Martin's predecessor, Jean Chrétien, turned federal nothingness into an art form — a collision of Chrétien's low-key, don't-show-yourself style and opposition benches peopled with politicians from Quebec and the West who didn't much like the whole idea of the federal government anyway.

And even older hands might blame former prime minister Brian Mulroney, whose nine years in office from 1984 to 1993 were so laden with big, heavy, world-changing moments for the federal government that everyone just needed a rest from all things Ottawa.

Wherever you want to pin the beginnings of the federal existential crisis, and we haven't even mentioned globalization and the rise of provincial and municipal power, it is reasonably safe to argue that this unwanted Christmas election is its logical result. Feats of strength and airing of grievances — has it come to this? Never mind an election without a point — what happens if our federal government is pointless?

EKOS Research Associates recently did a sweeping survey for the *Toronto Star*, relying on newly gathered data and a historical look-back at previous surveys on the state of the nation. The distemper of this season put all the immediate news focus on how Canadians were feeling about issues of the day and the pending election.

But it's worth pausing and looking at some of the deeper questions EKOS probed about where federal

governance is at these days.

Asked to rate which level of government was important to them, provincial and municipal governments easily outscored the federal regime. While 72 per cent said the provincial government was important to them, and 66 per cent said the same about municipal government, only 58 per cent said that was true of Ottawa.

EKOS also asked hard questions. It asked how the federal government was operating and then, how people would prefer that it handle its responsibilities. What EKOS was probing, in effect, was what Canadians expect out of their federal government these days by way of relevance.

Well, the results are mixed. More than two-thirds of respondents, 67 per cent, said the current government of Canada was following "a careful, steady-as-she-goes approach." Only 15 per cent said they were getting "bold, new vision."

But Canadians are divided over whether that's a good thing. While it's true that a majority, 54 per cent, say they would like a visionary federal regime, a healthy 40 per cent want the careful, lower-key approach. Clearly, if Ottawa suddenly got serious about firing up the imagination of Canadians again with in-your-face federalism, a lot of people could get nervous.

Perhaps that's why federal politicians seem so shy about "the vision thing."

Observers of U.S. politics might have noted that this whole business of the federal government's role is also proving to be yet another mark of distinction between the worlds north and south of the Canada-U.S. border.

It's hard not to notice that President George W. Bush seems to regard every emergency in that country, from 9/11 to the recent New Orleans flood, as another opportunity for Washington to argue it needs to get more enmeshed in the jurisdiction of traditionally more-powerful state governments.

Here in Canada, by contrast, Ottawa is increasingly more apologetic about getting in the provinces' way.

The recent water crisis at the Ontario native reserve in Kashechewan is a case in point; questions of evacuation were juggled back and forth between the two levels of government for fear of the feds stepping on the emergency powers of the province.

More generally, Martin's embrace of "asymmetrical federalism" speaks to an attitude in Ottawa that seeks to avoid inflaming the jealously guarded power of the provinces.

Canadians, though, are becoming accustomed to Ottawa apologizing for itself. It is as if it doesn't really know why it exists, so it keeps wildly vacillating between questioning its relevance and pleading for it.

That, in summary, helps explain why the country is getting an election about nothing, brought to you by a government and opposition who fear that's what Ottawa is all about, too.

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