

Editorial: Harper strikes out for the third time

After tying up Parliament for weeks with procedural tactics, Conservative leader Stephen Harper has struck out for the third time.

He did so by failing last night to bring down the Liberals over a federal budget he first supported, then rejected after Prime Minister Paul Martin made a deal with Jack Layton's New Democrats that added billions of dollars in new spending on social programs. That the Liberals and NDP prevailed over this folly, however narrowly, is a mercy.

Thanks to independent MP Chuck Cadman, Canadians have been spared a costly election that more than likely would have returned a minority Parliament much like the current one.

When MPs reconvene after next week's break, they should heed Martin's plea to "move forward in a spirit of co-operation ... to make this Parliament work for the people of Canada." But the signs are not good. Far from meeting Martin halfway, Harper complained about Liberal "acts of corruption and desperation," and warned the war was far from over.

Why was last night's squeaker of a vote Harper's third strikeout?

Because he also has failed to persuade Canadians generally to put their faith in his party or to get them to share his zeal for an election now.

Harper made Parliament's rafters ring denouncing the Liberals' tawdry wrongdoing. Yet the Tories continue to trail in the polls. Most voters remain unpersuaded that the Martin team is fatally tainted.

Voters fault the Liberals on ethics, of course, and rightly so. But most feel Canada-U.S. relations, managing the economy and health care are higher priority matters. And they give the Liberals higher marks on these issues.

Given his dismal batting record, Harper should have the sense to stop swinging, for now at least. While Canadians punished the Liberals last June 28 by denying them a majority, the voters did not give the Tories carte blanche to bring Parliament to a standstill. The Liberals should now be allowed to govern until Mr. Justice John Gomery reports. Martin promises to call an election within 30 days of the report being released.

Though Harper will have more opportunities before Parliament's summer recess to force another confidence vote, he would be wise to refrain. He seems too eager to oust people who have more support than he does.

The time has come to cool the fury in Parliament, to ease the pressure on Martin to resort to seedy vote buying, and to let him deliver on his many promises, including ethical

promises. Martin has vowed, for example, to bring in tough, transparent rules for advertising contracts. While important steps have been taken, Gomery suggested this week more must be done. Martin should follow up.

Harper, too, can make good use of the coming months to hold Martin to account for clean, competent government, and to reposition his Tories as a credible, moderate alternative.

Canadians were repelled by sponsorship wrongdoing. Liberals are still paying a price. But the Tories alienated some federalists by teaming up with the separatist Bloc Québécois to make Parliament unworkable, and to deny Canadians a budget that does well by cities, Atlantic Canada, child care, affordable housing, higher education and the environment.

And while Martin's manoeuvring to retain power wasn't a pretty sight, it was Harper who triggered the unsavoury bidding war. He pushed for a non-confidence vote the moment his party edged up in the polls. And he rejected Martin's offer to buy peace in Parliament by promising an election once Gomery reports.

The Conservative leader now finds himself today back where he would have been, had he accepted that offer. Only weaker.

Belinda Stronach defected to the Liberals, dealing Harper a devastating blow. Stronach brought the Tories credibility in Ontario, where they must do far better to form a government. Her defection suggests Harper does not understand Central Canada, cannot keep moderates in the party and is too willing to make deals with separatists. All this has rekindled concern about the Tories' fitness to govern.

Harper must try to reverse this damage before Gomery reports. He can begin by accepting a truce and letting Parliament get on with its work.