

Warning: These politics can make your skin crawl



By [JEFFREY SIMPSON](#)

- Saturday, April 23, 2005 Page A23

What is the proper word for Canadian politics today? Disgusting? Awful? Sordid? Dispiriting?

Ask yourself: Would you want any children to watch Parliament, let alone some day wish to enter it? A warning, like one on a cigarette package, should run across the bottom of the parliamentary television channel, "This programming can be dangerous to your civic health."

Fierce partisans, of whom there are fewer and fewer in the country, might relish this blood sport, especially if their side (Conservative or Bloc Québécois in particular) appears to have the upper hand.

For the vast majority of Canadians, the histrionics, name-calling, mud-splattering, shouting, eye-bulging outrage and dumb, blind partisanship bring the whole institution of Parliament, and those elected to it, into justified disrepute.

That is the dirty public face of politics. In private yesterday, two very thoughtful political people, a Conservative MP and a NDP adviser, despaired about the corrosive impact of this period on public confidence in government. Their parties are part of this vortex, and they regretted it, but it has become now an accepted part of parliamentary life, given the media's almost complete lack of interest in anything substantive, that the game of politics must be played this way.

Worse, the Conservative understood that if that party won the election, it, too, would be in the vortex, just as prime minister Brian Mulroney's was after his landslide win in 1984. And the New Democrat appreciated that if people lose faith in government -- in its capacity to do good, and do it efficiently -- then what hope would exist for social democracy's advance? The short-term temptations of tomorrow's news clip, in other words, work against the long-term interests of parties. But they cannot apparently help themselves.

So we might just as well get on with an election campaign that will be as depressing for its rhetorical vitriol and intellectual vacuities as any we have recently known. Parliament, after all, has utterly ceased to function as a body even remotely connected to legislating.

We who predicted so confidently that no election would occur in 2005 should admit our mistake. We did not know fully what was coming from the Gomery inquiry, how it would influence public opinion, and how it would debilitate the government and make frantic the opposition parties. Politicians almost never admit error, but journalists should.

Wait, though. Perhaps that observation about empty hyperbole is not entirely fair. (Can one try to be fair these days?) The New Democratic Party has tried, occasionally, to talk about issues -- Kyoto, foreign policy, taxation, for example -- whether or not one agrees with their prescriptions. But in this cyclone of hyperbole about scandal and corruption, these earnest NDP voices have been all but lost, so that even the NDP has been unable to resist joining the circus, if somewhat less hyperbolically than the others.

The Conservatives, for their part, are not even trying to discuss issues, and the Bloc Québécois has only one issue: the eventual destruction of Canadian

federalism.

The Conservatives have made a bet: that one word, "corruption," if repeated often enough (say 500 times a day), will so impregnate itself in the minds of Canadians that nine or 10 weeks from now, the electorate will deliver a nascent Conservative government.

Conservatives reckon that the less they say with precision about anything else, the better. The Conservatives have so diluted their ideas (if not their rhetoric) that scarcely a nickel's ray of light separates them from the Liberals, except on gay marriage. Taken at face value, the

Conservatives' promises have transformed the party into Liberals promising to be honest.

The Bloc, of course, is cock-a-hoop with joy, faced at home with discredited Liberals and largely irrelevant Conservatives and New Democrats. Their leader, Gilles Duceppe, has perfected the Lucien Bouchard performance of blending humiliation, anger, offended pride and feigned reasonableness into a toxic mixture of trouble for federalism.

It is with this combination that Mr. Harper would deal if he needed Bloc support to prop up a Conservative minority, a prospect the Liberals will use as part of their scare campaign outside Quebec against the Conservatives. The other part will be an old reprise: Mr. Harper has a "hidden agenda" so ideological that trees would prematurely drop their fruit were they to understand it.

The business of government has essentially ended. The timeline for planning is now measured at best in days, at worst in hours. Every decision, every utterance will be calculated for médiatique consumption to advance each party's partisan cause that is its guiding star. Few accusations are apparently too base not to be worth repeating, few words are apparently too excessive not to be outside the realm of reasonable discourse.

Voting turnout has been declining; voter interest has been receding; civic engagement has been falling. Watching and listening to politics as conceived and executed by today's politicians, and reported by today's media, is it any wonder?

jsimpson@globeandmail.ca