

Through a mirror darkly



By Rex Murphy

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This just-recessed Parliament calls forth an echo of Oscar Wilde's neat summary of the Bible, that it "begins with a man and a woman in a garden and "ends in Revelations."

The distressing and distractive session began with the sponsorship scandal and ended with same-sex marriage.

It was a brutish and angry session, claustrophobic in its partisanship, its most dramatic moment a key no-confidence motion, and the midnight conversion just before that vote of Belinda Stronach from erstwhile Conservative leadership contender to Liberal minister.

Ms. Stronach's Pauline conversion saved the Liberals (or at least allowed Chuck Cadman to do so) and temporarily sent Peter MacKay to the bucolic solace of the family potato patch with his dog, from whence he went on camera to given an extended interview that owed equal parts to Hansard and Harlequin.

Above all else, this session was strange and, at times, weird. Witness the Grewal tapes. They were, in their sad mixture of sly imbecility, low-handedness and the dim incompetence in their presentation (a bit here, a snip there, eight minutes now, four hours later), a kind of negative peak of parliamentary behaviour.

The tapes episode did possibly fatal damage to Gurmant Grewal, but its more consequential damage was to Stephen Harper. That Mr. Harper didn't, from the get-go, dismiss Mr. Grewal's ploy (you don't spy on your colleagues, even if they're Liberals) was one more unignorable example that his leadership instincts are spotty at best and, at times, just plainly inexplicable.

Mr. Harper consolidated his negatives with the same-sex debate. Not, mind, on the debate itself. His opposition to same-sex legislation, in the teeth of most progressive opinion that reads such opposition as either Neanderthal or bigoted, had elements of principle and courage.

The blunder, and it was a huge one, came when the Liberals, in co-operation with the Bloc, finally got the tendentious issue to a vote, and won. Mr. Harper then tried to characterize the vote as not valid, since most of the "federalists" in Parliament had opposed same-sex.

It was far, far too late in the day to be taking note of the fact that Bloc votes were "not federalist," since Mr. Harper had been in unofficial alliance with these same "non-federalists" from the first moments of this Parliament.

He had sought these same votes on numerous no-confidence motions and, more to the point, would have been delirious with triumph *if* the Bloc, indeed, had voted against same-sex marriage. How other, then, to characterize his attempt to discount them in the very last hours of the Parliament but as both ridiculous and hypocritical?

During this Parliament, Mr. Harper and the Conservatives have executed a reverse miracle. They went into a House when the minority government was chained to the wall by the sponsorship scandal, taking the most dramatic and public drubbing that any government has taken in modern memory, and whose own leader was threatening to become a caricature for vacillation, artful compromise and desperate improvisation.

Yet, at Parliament's end, despite every effort to vote them out, despite revelations from the Gomery inquiry that should have obliterated what remnants of integrity and credibility they still retain, the Liberals were on an upward arc in the opinion polls, and Paul Martin's reputation -- to say the very least -- is stronger and more appealing than Mr. Harper's.

That Mr. Martin survived at all is the other side of the Harper reverse miracle.

It may be that we will have to add to Mr. Martin's gifts, one we perhaps should have listed earlier: simple tenacity.

To stay in the fight in moments of greatest gloom or embarrassment, to find the energy for just one more day's contest when (at the time) it seems pointless to have another day's contest -- this is the attribute of a leader under siege. That Mr. Martin is still *there* after the batterings of the last months, and not only there but in some ineffable way partly rehabilitated, is a tribute to the man's resources.

And, alas for Mr. Harper, to Mr. Harper's resources.

It is an interesting dynamic: Both these men, Mr. Harper and Mr. Martin, depend on each other. The weaknesses of the one is the other's strength, which is an ironic tribute to the leadership of either.

In politics, to alter Lear, "leadership is all." And after the vagaries and vulgarities of this session, neither Mr. Harper nor Mr. Martin have found either the means or the mettle to transcend one of the most inauspicious periods in modern Canadian political history.

They are both, already, stand-ins and both their parties know it. The story of this session, beyond soap opera, defection, same-sex or Gurmant (Maxwell Smart) Grewal, is that this great country is without leadership.

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