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*Two Cheers for Minority Government: The Evolution of
Canadian Parliamentary Democracy* (review)

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**Two Cheers for Minority Government:
The Evolution of Canadian Parliamentary
Democracy**

by Peter H. Russell. Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publication Limited, 2008.

This important and highly accessible book is of interest to those studying multiparty parliamentary first-past-the-post systems, in general, and the Canadian system, in particular. For Russell, the governments producing policy and legislative outcomes most preferred by Canadians are minority governments since to maintain the confidence of the House of Commons they must propose compromises that better serve Canadians. Under majority governments, Russell argues prime ministers tend to suppress parliamentary debate, which eliminates the checks and balances of the parliamentary system—a problem exacerbated under *false* majority government since the ruling party usually obtains less than 40 percent of the electoral support. He attributes the 12 (out of 27) short-lived minority governments from 1921–2006 to Canadians being divided along more than liberal-conservative lines as evidenced by the fact that since 1935, third parties have had the support of at least 20 percent of the popular vote.

Unfortunately, this book came out before Prime Minister Harper called an early election¹ on 14 October 2008. We can, however, use Russell's analysis to understand how Harper's misreading of his governing power in the first mandate plunged Canada into a parliamentary crisis on the inaugural day of his second mandate. In his first minority government, Harper was able to implement many proposals by making them subject to a vote of confidence which, to avoid an election, the Liberal Party did not oppose. Taking advantage of the weaknesses of the Liberal Party and wanting a parliamentary majority, Harper called an early election for October 14. Canadians gave him only a slightly stronger minority than in his first mandate. On 19 November, Harper used the Speech from the Throne to outline his plan for the 40th Parliament painting a

rosy picture of the Canadian economy. The Opposition disagreed since they believed that the speech did not contain the economic stimulus needed to deal with the negative impact of the world financial crisis. In addition, they opposed Harper's proposal to eliminate the government's financial support for parties. Harper's plan, however, backfired as his apparent resolve to rule as if he had a majority united the Opposition, who on 1 December announced their intention to form a Liberal–New Democratic Party coalition (with support from the Bloc Québécois) to defeat Harper's government. To avoid a non-confidence vote and the possibility of a Liberal-led coalition government, on 4 December Harper made history by convincing the Governor General to prorogue Parliament until 26 January 2009. On 27 January, Harper presented his budget to the House, offering an extensive stimulus package that will produce the largest deficit in Canadian history. The Liberals, now stronger under their new leader Michael Ignatieff, decided to support the government and kill their agreement with the NDP. Ignatieff made it clear, however, that the Liberals were putting Harper on “probation” requiring him to provide quarterly economic statements. It remains to be seen whether Harper learned his lesson.

Russell argues that Canadian minority governments avoid coalitions because they prefer to gain parliamentary support on an issue-by-issue basis rather than facing the constraints imposed by coalition partners. In spite of this, he argues Canadians should examine the experience of the northern European countries (Denmark, Spain, Norway, and Sweden) with minority coalition governments where there is no government paralysis and little resistance to coalition governments. Voters and parties accept that in multiparty legislatures there will be post-election negotiations in order to avoid the constant threat of early elections. For Russell, Canadian should not be afraid of coalition governments because other developed democracies have not suffered under them. Russell argues that Canadians elect minority governments not because they are

unaware that their choices may lead to minority governments, but rather because voters understand the diversity of preferences across regions and collectively prefer the compromises of minority governments to the uncompromising prime ministerial positions of majority governments. Russell documents the achievements of Canadian minority governments, and shows that even in a first-past-the-post Westminster system, minority governments have produced important pieces of legislation.

In conclusion, Russell has written an important contemporary book that sheds light on the current Canadian political debate. Using his framework, we understand that by misreading the power conferred by Canadians, Harper had to make far more compromises than he had envisioned prior to the October 2008 election. I would have liked, however, to see greater emphasis placed on the effect the regional distribution of voter preferences has on electoral outcomes and whether this will make minority

governments a common feature of the political landscape—Canada has had three consecutive minority governments. The question that remains unanswered is whether regional representation makes the Canadian electoral system a *hybrid* between the first-past-the-post and the proportional representation systems. This highly accessible book could not have come at better time since it helps those interested to understand the advantages of minority governments and that coalition governments may not be such a bad possibility for Canadians in the future.

NOTE

¹He called an early election even though his government had passed a law (with the support of the Opposition) setting a four-year election cycle counting from the date of the last election.

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