

OPINION

Climate change and Parliamentary democracy: both on the rocks?

Tories and Grits delay bill that would require the Canadian government set regulations to attain medium-term greenhouse gas emission reductions of 25 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, and long-term reductions of 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050

By CHRISTOPHER MAJKA

HALIFAX—The vote in the House on Oct. 21 on whether to delay Bill C-311, the Climate Change Accountability Act, by sending it back to the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development for further consideration, may seem like a trivial item of Parliamentary process, however, it masks a political ploy of enormous importance. Led by the Conservatives, with a majority of Liberals supporting them, the vote passed 169-93.

The consequence of this referral, which effectively delays consideration of the bill by Parliament until 2010, is to sideline efforts to have Canada come to the negotiations at the forthcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference in

Copenhagen in December, 2009, with progressive legislation to fight global warming. The bill would require that the Canadian government set regulations to attain medium-term greenhouse gas emission reductions of 25 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, and long-term reductions of 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050. These are the same emission targets adopted by the European Union, and announced in the United States as part of President Barack Obama's "New Energy For America" initiative.

The irony is that this bill, originally tabled in October 2006 by the New Democratic Party, had already passed third reading in the House of Commons by the fall of 2008 with the full support of the NDP, Liberal, and Bloc Québécois caucuses (the Conservatives voted against it). It had reached the Senate, however,

the election called in the fall of 2008 meant that it did not receive Royal Assent before the dissolution of Parliament, and has now had to crawl its way through the Canadian Parliamentary system yet again.

Stephen Harper's attempts to foil this legislation appear to be directed by his desire to have Canadian environmental policy as bereft of substantive content as possible in going into the Copenhagen negotiations. Why the Liberals, having already voted unanimously for this bill a year ago, would now side with the Conservatives, seems to defy reason (it bears noting, however, that 14 Liberal MPs broke ranks and voted against the delay). They were Sott Andrews, Kirsty Duncan, Andrew Kania, Dominic LeBlanc, Keith Martin, Alexandra Mendes, Brian Murphy, Anita Neville, Rob Oliphant, Glen Pearson, Mario Silva, Michelle Simson, Alan Tonks, and Frank Valeriote.

If our political system is to have any meaning, it must be able to effectively address critical issues in a timely and transparent manner. Politics does entail a competition of ideas and ideologies amongst parties, but if these are pursued to an extreme, they drive the political system itself

to loggerheads where inaction becomes the only outcome.

Political analysts of all stripes seem to agree that the present Conservative government has driven hyper-partisanship to a degree not hitherto seen in Canadian parliamentary democracy—a zero-sum game designed to hobble Parliament, its committees, and the Canadian political system as a whole. If we allow this to happen, Canadians—and the global environment and all its denizens—become the losers. Comments made yesterday with respect to Bill C-311 make this abundantly clear.

Mark Fried, policy coordinator with Oxfam Canada was quoted as saying, "This bill (C-311) has wide support from a broad spectrum of Canadians. Politicians need to set aside their partisan differences and agree on these science-based emissions reduction targets. Time is running out."

While Dale Marshall of the David Suzuki Foundation said that, "Passing this bill (C-311) before Copenhagen in December is Parliament's only hope of proving that we are prepared to work seriously through the United Nations to find a solution to global warming. The Liberals voting with the Conservatives may have made that impossible."

Politicians of all stripes, who take seriously their responsibilities to their constituents, need to find mechanisms of collaborating and forging consensus positions for the common good of Canadians, humanity, and the global environment. If we fail to do this, the only winner will be the hyper-political, hyper-polarized, hyper-adversarial vision of Canadian society that Stephen Harper appears to promulgate.

Parliament must again become a vehicle to express the clearly-articulated desires of Canadian citizens for action—on environmental and many other fronts—rather than a forum for the frustration of political objectives. In the longer term, electoral and Parliamentary reforms are needed to change the ground rules of Canadian politics so these institutions can serve the Canadian citizenry and their collective good, rather than being a showcase of old-school, pork-barrel, divide and conquer, bribe-em-with-their-own-money, ego-driven political shenanigans.

It may be no exaggeration to say that never in our lifetimes have these objectives been more pressing than today—and given the spectrum of environmental, financial, social, and political issues that presently confront us, they are certain to sharpen even further in the future. Now is a time for all those involved in political life to draw on their skills of statesmanship and make this democracy work for all of us. Please.

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