

Minority government will prove challenging

By Mark Pavilons

Victory may be fleeting for the federal Liberals who are facing a tough time as they form a minority government in Ottawa. Traditionally in Canada, minority governments have a relatively short lifespan, averaging one year, 140 days. The last Liberal minority government was under Paul Martin in 2004-2006.

Subsequently, Stephen Harper led Canada through two consecutive minority governments from 2006-08 and again 2008-2011, before gaining a majority in 2011.

It's likely Canadians will once again be going back to the polls in roughly two years. At this point, there's no firm commitment from other parties on forming a coalition with the Liberals.

King-Vaughan MPP Stephen Lecce was in former prime minister Stephen Harper's inner circle in his third and final term of office. Lecce served as director of media relations and chief spokesperson to Harper, and was responsible for enhancing cross-government communications.

King-Vaughan Liberal MP Deb Schulte said she's optimistic the minority government can work, noting there have been some successful ones in Canadian history. The Liberals will draw from all of the opposition parties to move their agenda forward. There's no real advantage to forming an official coalition, she said.

She's confident that consensus can be reached. She pointed to her work on the federal environment committee which included all parties. They worked well together and passed recommendations by reaching compromises.

Schulte said she likes to work that, but admits it will be a very different term ahead.

Schulte hopes the government will listen to the ideas and recommendations of the other parties, since some of them have merit.

"I'm always optimistic," she said. "Who wants another election?"

The first, key step is to approve and pass the federal budget. And that means working together. We want to deliver for Canadians. A minority government exists when the governing party does not hold a majority of seats in the House of Commons (or provincial legislature) but is still able to command the confidence of the House.

Because seats are distributed more evenly among the parties in minority Parliaments, opposition parties have greater opportunity to block legislation from passing. Typically, a minority government negotiates with other parties and adjusts its policies to get the majority of votes needed to pass legislation.

There have been informal coalition governments where two or more parties combine forces and share Cabinet posts. No formal coalition government (except 1917-21) has ever existed.

The government must maintain the confidence of the House in order to continue to govern. According to House of Commons procedure, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet are able to exercise authority only with the consent and approval ('confidence') of a majority of the Members of the House of Commons.

Not all votes Parliaments amount to confidence. However, votes that do carry the weight of confidence include those related to the Speech from the Throne, money bills (budgets) and specific confidence votes.

If the government loses the confidence of the House, the prime minister will typically ask the Governor General to dissolve Parliament and call an election.