

CANADA'S THREE-PARTY SYSTEM MAKES FOR LIVELY MINORITY GOVERNMENTS

Last May, for the sixth time in the past nine elections, Canadians elected a minority government. The Conservative government under Prime Minister Clark lasted seven months before being defeated in a vote of non-confidence. Canada's third major party, the New Democratic Party (N.D.P.), played a leading role in the government's defeat.

In a majority situation, the two largest parties are the main actors, but in a minority government the smaller third parties like the N.D.P. can wield unaccustomed power.

Coalitions between parties with a sharing of Cabinet seats occur rarely in Canada—only twice since 1867. The existence of significant third parties leaves a minority government in a particularly hazardous position, for it may be defeated at almost any time if one or more of the smaller parties vote with the main opposition party.

But a minority government is not necessarily an ineffective one. In 1957, after almost twenty-two years of Liberal administration, Progressive Conservative leader John Diefenbaker formed a minority government. In less than four months the government passed substantial legislation dealing with increases in old-age pensions, cash advances on farm-stored wheat and grants to the Atlantic provinces. The Diefenbaker government also negotiated the establishment of the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD) Agreement in 1957.

In 1958 Prime Minister Diefenbaker called an election and the government's minority was transformed into a crushing majority. This was followed by three minority governments in quick succession: 1962 (Progressive Conservative), 1963 (Liberal), and 1965 (Liberal).

The period of 1963-68 was one of the most stable in government because Liberal Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson required only a few votes from the opposition parties, and so maintained power with little difficulty.

Under Pearson, important legislation was passed creating the Canada Pension Plan, the Canada Assistance Plan (providing allowances for underpaid groups) and the Medical Care Insurance Act (a nationwide medical care plan). After heavy debate the Pearson administration also passed a bill creating Canada's new maple leaf flag.

In 1968, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the newly chosen Liberal leader, was elected Prime Minister of Canada with a large majority. By the election in 1972, how-

ever, support had waned, and Trudeau scrambled to victory with a minority government of 109 seats to 107 for the Progressive Conservatives, the slimmest margin of victory ever.

The Progressive Conservatives vowed to bring down the government at the earliest opportunity, but the N.D.P., holding the balance of power, was in a precarious position. If it supported the Conservatives and forced an election, the party might be viewed as a spoiler and lose some of its hard-won seats. If it supported the Liberals, it might alienate people who had voted for the N.D.P. out of dislike for the Liberal administration; on the other hand it might be able to influence the government's policies in directions the N.D.P. favoured.



John Diefenbaker



Lester B. Pearson

National Film Board, Ottawa

Ashley-Crippen

Yet the uncertainty of the Liberals' hold on power may have led to a better administration. On January 1, 1973, Prime Minister Trudeau announced on nationwide television that he would be paying more attention to opposition parties.

"We are forced to listen," he said, "and probably as a result of that some of our legislation will be better."

During the two years in power as a minority it became commonplace for Liberal cabinet ministers to consult opposition members before introducing bills in Parliament. Because meetings between the government and opposition leaders took place frequently, the views and wishes of the opposition parties were often incorporated into Liberal policy.

The legislation of the Trudeau minority government included the reform of social security and family allowances, the introduction of the Foreign Investment Review Act and changes in the election financing act.

In 1974, after two precarious years in power, the Liberals were defeated in Parliament. The N.D.P. had decided they could side with the Liberals no longer and the country returned to the polls. That time Prime Minister Trudeau was returned with a majority. Last May's federal election resulted in the sixth of a string of minority governments. Whether Canadians want a minority or majority government will be seen on February 18, 1980, when they cast their votes.