

## Is a minority government in the offing? Might it be good for health care?

Politicians watch all opinion polls closely, but they are watching the ones being conducted for this federal election campaign like hawks. The reason is simple: today's polls carry more weight than they did in the last 2 elections because the Liberals finally face some serious competition. "A minority Liberal government is quite possible," says David Cameron, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto. "The Liberals have not offered voters a powerful reason to keep them in office. They were close to a minority last time, and the likelihood that they can get a better result in their third election than they did in their second, without changing leaders and facing the new Canadian Alliance Party, is low."

If Jean Chrétien's party doesn't win a bare minimum of 151 seats in the House of Commons, Canada will have its first minority government since Joe Clark's short-lived turn in the sun in 1979. If we do get one in the next few months, it could have a huge impact on issues such as health care because minority governments make for strange bedfellows. Even a small, left-leaning party like the NDP holds enormous potential power if it is called on to prop up the Liberals.

So how would a minority govern-

ment operate? Federally, minority governments traditionally rely on opportunism. From 1957 to 1979, both Liberal and Tory minority governments — there were 6 of them — recruited allies as they needed them, issue by issue. Each minority government bounced back and forth between the opposition parties, according to which issue they could dangle in front of which potential ally. This is likely the way a Liberal minority government would operate today.

Cameron says it might be forced to generate political energy that is missing from the current government. "If a government is running for its life, it is likely to be more creative in policy terms than the stand-pat, don't-rock-the-boat majority government we have watched for the past few years. It will be acutely sensitive to both voters and potential partners."

But since the Canadian Alliance will have all the momentum and will be eager to bring down the government, the Liberals will seek support from the NDP, Bloc Québécois or Tories, all of which are now on the left of Chrétien's Liberals.

And why would they prop up the Liberals? "It is worth while for a third party to support a minority government if it can get its platform adopted," explains Cameron. "None of those parties

can hope to form a government themselves, nor would they get in bed with each other. But if they can claim a policy victory and keep the Alliance out of power at the same time, they will resist any pressure to defeat the Liberals."

Cameron anticipates that the dynamics of a minority government will strengthen the Canada Health Act. "The Alliance is seen as no friend of a publicly funded health care system, and the other 4 parties are committed to preserving medicare." Since the Liberals have made the preservation of medicare central to their platform, they will enlist NDP, Tory and Bloc support for new health care initiatives. They can then accuse the Alliance of trying to destroy Canada's favourite social program by recommending the erosion of federal authority.

What gives the Liberals the chills right now, though, is the prospect that Stockwell Day, the Alliance leader, might do a better job of building a coalition than Jean Chrétien. Day will be a real threat if he can convince undecided voters in Quebec that he is committed to decentralization and undecided voters in Ontario that the Alliance can grow beyond its Western roots. That's why his success last August in recruiting 2 former Bloc Québécois MPs as Alliance candidates in Quebec prompted an outburst of antiseptatist rhetoric from senior Liberals, who accused the Alliance leader of "sleeping with the enemy." (The next day the *National Post* pointed out that the Liberals had been actively wooing a couple of sitting Bloc MPs.)

The Liberals remain well ahead of the Alliance in the polls and, now that Day is in the House of Commons, they are confident that his vaunted "charisma" will not survive the verbal fisticuffs of Question Period.

But they may be wrong. If they are, and the Alliance continues to rise in the polls, Liberal strategists will have to start planning the tactics they will use to ensure the survival of the first federal minority government of the new century. — *Charlotte Gray*, Ottawa

### Halifax says No to pesticides

With a strong show of hands at city hall — 17 to 6 — Halifax has become the first major city in Canada to ban the use of pesticides on residential lawns and gardens. Beginning next April, it will be illegal to use pesticides within 50 m of hospitals or schools. The full ban takes effect in 2003.

The city council vote capped 4 months of often rancorous public hearings and debate. Among the no-spray proponents was the Nova Scotia College of Family Physicians. Restricting pesticide use "is in the best interests of the health of our children," says Dr. Cathy MacLean, the president-elect. "My sense is that children are at risk with respect to exposure to pesticides because of their size." — *Donalee Moulton*, Halifax

