

Till Elections Do Us Part:

What Makes a Government Coalition Work?

*A Canadian – European Dialogue*

### **Event Report**

On March 12, 2009, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) held a joint public one-day forum in Ottawa, Canada, dealing with challenges, opportunities and experiences with multi-party coalition governments. The forum was divided into two parts: during the first session, *‘Before the Yes: How to Build a Solid Base’*, three political scientists and one journalist discussed aspects of building government coalitions. During the second session, *‘After the Yes: How to Live Happily (Ever) After’*, representatives of Canadian, German and Dutch political parties reflected on their experiences with coalition governments. The public forum brought together more than 40 European and Canadian participants from the public, non-governmental as well as academic sectors, and the media. This report provides an overview of the themes covered.<sup>1</sup>

### **Canadians’ and Europeans’ Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Coalition Governments**

Canadian participants emphatically pointed to Canada’s lack of experience with coalition governments. Larry Brown, President of CCPA, reminded participants of Canada’s most recent “flirt” with a coalition government. In late 2008, with the imminent possibility of a coalition between the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Conservative minority government of Prime Minister Harper and many media outlets described coalitions as undemocratic, subversive and even as a danger to democracy. Tony Martin, Canadian MP for the NDP, suggested, “coalition” had become a political term that the public deeply resented. However, in situations of minority governments, coalitions present a true opportunity for stable majority governments, also representing the majority of voters.

Libby Davies, Canadian MP for the NDP, reminded participants that in Canada’s recent history, there have been only two experiences with coalition agreements on the federal level: one in 2005 and one in late 2008. In 2005, with the governing Liberal Party in disarray, the NDP successfully approached the Liberal Party to change the budget priorities in exchange for NDP’s support of the budget. In late 2008, shortly after an

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<sup>1</sup> This report was prepared by Martin Fischer, doctoral candidate at Carleton University’s Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

election in which the Conservative Party did not receive a majority and delivered an economic update that did not address the needs of the Canadian public, the three opposition parties tried to form a governing coalition. The Liberal Party and the NDP signed a cooperative government agreement and, together with the separatist Bloc Québécois (BQ), they also reached a policy agreement, in which the BQ assured its support of a Liberal-NDP government. Gerd Braune, German journalist in Ottawa, suggested that two weak points characterized the proposed coalition. First, its prospects for success were dampened by a weak Liberal Party leader. Second, without the BQ, the Liberal Party and the NDP did not have more seats in Parliament than the Conservative Party. The prospects of a coalition government being supported by the BQ provided considerable avenues of attack from the government.

An important theme of the forum was the role of the media during the public discourse on the possibility of a Liberal-NDP coalition. It was suggested that the TV and print media did not contribute to the clarification of issues pertaining to coalition governments. Gerd Braune was adamant in his position that the Canadian media could have better explained the details of coalition governments and that it repeated false claims of PM Harper that coalition governments are illegitimate and undemocratic. At the same time, he suggested that the parties seeking to form the coalition missed every opportunity to make use of the media to present their position. Conversely, the governing Conservative Party's efforts to make use of the media to disseminate their side of the story were extremely successful.

In Europe, and in Germany in particular, opinion polls show strong support for coalition governments. Although German political parties have to pass a five percent threshold in order to be represented in parliament<sup>2</sup>, it is uncommon for any party to receive a majority and hence coalitions have become a core element of the political system. The same is true in the Netherlands, despite the absence of any minimum vote threshold. Coalitions typically introduce some flexibility into governments as parties exert checks and balances on one another.

Dietmar Herz, Professor at the Erfurt School of Public Policy, provided a brief overview of Germany's post-World War II political landscape. All German governments since 1949 have been coalitions of either the Social Democratic Party (SPD) or the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) with one (or more) of the smaller parties, with the exception of two Grand Coalitions (1966-1969 and the present one). Until 1961, the SPD and the CDU interacted in a bipolar system. From 1961 to 1983, the economically liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) was able to provide a governing majority together with one of the two large parties. With the emergence of the Green Party and its representation in the German Parliament, two ideological camps formed: one made up of the SPD and the Green Party and the other of the CDU and the FDP. The current political debate and development of the party system suggests that it is likely that coalitions of any constellation would form in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> Representation is also possible by winning three or more constituency seats directly.

## **Legislative Frameworks and Electoral Systems**

Gerd Braune characterized Canada as a partial democracy on the electoral district (riding) level and a quasi-democracy on the federal level, a sentiment echoed by many of the forum's attendees. Effectively, Canada's electoral system condemns up to 50% of each riding into the political system's sidelines. He suggested that coalitions require proportional electoral systems. In such systems, political parties are better able to represent specific fragmented societal interests. Further, Braune expressed deep surprise at Canada's preference for minority governments, which tend to have short life-spans.

During her presentation, Professor Barbara Cameron of York University suggested that the discussion about a possible coalition government exposed Canadians' low level of awareness about the executive government. In particular, there was great confusion regarding the Governor General's involvement in Parliamentary affairs in general and her role in granting Prime Minister Harper's request to prorogue Parliament in particular. Cameron suggested that the role of the Governor General should be limited to her decisions regarding the formal appointment of the Prime Minister after a substantive choice has been made by the House of Commons.

Several participants expressed discontent over the handling of the crisis in 2008 by the government and the Governor General. Cameron argued that the series of events showed there is a need to codify parliamentary procedures. Most importantly, the convention of selecting the Prime Minister after an election needs to be reformed. Cameron recommended that the relationship between the executive and legislative branches needs to be clarified: rather than the Governor General calling on the leader of the party with the most votes to form the government, a vote in the legislature should determine the Prime Minister.

Also discussed at the forum was the relationship between coalition governments and electoral systems. Several participants suggested that a proportional electoral system increases the likelihood for coalition governments. Under such a system, the need for coalition building forces political parties to become more representative of diverse interests in complex societies. Herz argued that under a "winner-takes-all" electoral system, it is very unlikely for smaller parties to obtain seats. Hence, he sees the change of Canada's electoral system to proportional representation as a pre-requisite for smaller, sometimes more innovative, parties such as the Green Party to obtain seats in parliament. Participants discussed the reasons for Canada's first unsuccessful attempt to reform the electoral system on the provincial level through a referendum in Ontario in 2007. Most frequently, the panel returned to the role of the media as well as the passive role played by most social groups prior to the referendum. But also parties like the NDP, who benefit in some cases from the "first-past-the-post" (FPTP) electoral system on the provincial level, are reluctant to reform. A referendum similar to Ontario's will be held this year in British Columbia. The process and the results may provide further insight into Canadians' attitude toward the reform of the electoral system.

## **Impact of Coalitions on Government Policies**

The opportunities that coalition governments present for left-leaning governments' social policies were also explored. Grant Amyot, Professor at Queen's University, suggested that coalition governments tend to produce more progressive policies. Quantitative data collected from industrialized countries since World War II shows a strong correlation between proportional representation systems and parliaments without a single-party majority. During this time period, left-leaning parties formed coalition governments two thirds of the time in systems with proportional representation. The data shows a reverse relationship for majority systems with a single ruling party: right-leaning parties tended to form the government two thirds of the time.

The data also shows that countries with frequent coalition governments see higher GDP expenditure on welfare programs. Amyot argued that as a consequence, coalitions and proportional representation systems tend to produce conditions favorable to socially progressive governments. In countries where coalitions are common, the electorate tends to express stronger support for social democratic parties as they feel assured that a coalition will keep the center-left in check.

Panelists alerted the forum of a threat presented to social democratic parties by the opportunity to enter government through a coalition. The panel suggested that social democrats should not enter coalitions with the simple objective of being in government if there is a danger of abandoning social democratic principles.

## **Practicalities of Coalition Governments**

Both German and Canadian members of parliament spoke to the importance of balancing levels of internally-required secrecy and publicly demanded transparency during the negotiation process prior to publicly announcing the coalition's partners as well as during the coalition government's term in power.

Regarding the negotiation process prior to publicly announcing the formation of a coalition, Marlene Jennings, Canadian MP for the Liberal Party, and Libby Davies gave an account of the days leading up to the announcement of the coalition between the NDP and the Liberal Party. The parties perceived it of utmost importance to immediately react to the government's fiscal update, which was viewed to be an inadequate response to the unfolding economic crisis. The entire negotiation process occurred under intense time pressure and with extreme secrecy, even within the party teams. When the cooperative government agreement between the NDP and the Liberal Party and the policy accord between the Liberal Party, the NDP and the BQ were announced, the public responded unfavorably to a process that was widely seen to be a "backroom deal". Participants were reminded that German parties typically announce which constellation of parties they prefer during the campaign. At a minimum, parties proclaim which parties they will definitely not enter into negotiations with. However, German voters also know from experience which parties are more likely to form a governing coalition after an election.

Regarding coalitions' time in government, Niels Annen, German MP for the Social Democratic Party, spoke to his experience with the current grand coalition between Germany's SPD and CDU. He reminded participants that it is important to assess where a coalition's real decision-making power lies. Currently, with the grand coalition in power, the coalition committee (*Koalitionsausschuss*) has become the most powerful political body in Germany. This creates a problem for MPs as the relationship between the coalition committee and the parties' executive committees remains unclear.

Berend Jan van den Boomen, a member of the Dutch Labor Party, spoke of his experiences with coalition governments in the Netherlands, where the absence of an electoral threshold allows a multiplicity of parties to enter the national parliament. As a result, all governments are either minority governments or based on coalitions. He argued that in complex societies, it is unlikely that one party is able to provide widely accepted policies. Therefore, there is a large chance that coalitions can deliver successful outcomes. Parties need to have some flexibility when considering with whom they will form a coalition. For example, the Dutch Labor Party has, in the past, formed coalitions with the centrist as well as right-of-center party.

The forum was a successful start for future FES-CCPA cooperations and generated a lot of political and media interest. All of the participants agreed that the exchange on coalition governments proved useful and that it is likely the discussions about coalitions will resume during the next general election campaign in Canada. It is also to be expected that none of the opposition parties will exclude forming a coalition after the next parliamentary elections.