

RICHARD COLVIN AND THE AFGHAN DETAINEES

Introduction



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Focus

This CBC *News in Review* story examines the allegations about the torture of Afghan detainees made by Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin. We'll explore what he said, how others reacted to his testimony, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper's controversial decision to prorogue Parliament.

Did you know . . .

Prime Minister Harper did not announce the decision to prorogue Parliament himself. He had his press secretary, Dmitry Soudas, make the announcement.

On November 18, 2009, before a parliamentary subcommittee hearing, a Canadian diplomat named Richard Colvin made some stunning allegations. Colvin claimed that Afghan resistance fighters taken prisoner by Canadian troops had subsequently been tortured after being turned over to Afghan security forces. He also charged that senior Canadian military and political figures were aware that these abuses—which are against international law—had been taking place since 2006. He further testified that these officials had taken no action to halt the abuse.

Colvin's bombshell testimony set off a chain reaction in Ottawa, with prominent individuals such as retired Canadian Forces chief of staff Rick Hillier, Defence Minister Peter MacKay, and even Prime Minister Stephen Harper himself rejecting the accusations and casting doubt on the validity of Colvin's evidence. For their part, opposition politicians, including Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, Bloc Québécois chief Gilles Duceppe, and the NDP's Jack Layton, all called on the government to initiate a full-scale inquiry into the truth of Colvin's disturbing testimony.

However, instead of acceding to the opposition's demands to set up a parliamentary committee to investigate the Colvin affair, Harper decided at the end of December to prorogue—or

suspend—the current session of Parliament beyond its customary Christmas break. Instead of reconvening on January 25, 2010, Parliament would not meet again until March 3, 2010.

Harper claimed that his decision to prorogue Parliament had nothing to do with the exploding controversy over the Afghan detainees. Instead, he stated that prorogation was a normal parliamentary procedure, and that the government needed extra time to “recalibrate” its policy priorities. But his political opponents and many media commentators were quick to suggest that Harper's real motive was that he wanted to avoid having to face potentially damaging fallout from Colvin's accusations. They believed that he had moved to prorogue in order to head off any further revelations of government negligence in the Afghan detainee issue.

At the same time, a growing grassroots movement against prorogation was inspired by Christopher White, a young University of Alberta student. White started a Facebook group to promote his cause, and his protest quickly gathered momentum. By late January 2010, over 200 000 Canadians had joined the group “Canadians against Proroguing Parliament,” and thousands of people took to the streets in protest in a number of cities on January 23.

To Consider

1. Why were diplomat Richard Colvin's allegations of abuse of Afghan detainees captured by Canadian forces so explosive?
2. What reason did Prime Minister Stephen Harper give for his decision to prorogue Parliament?
3. According to Harper's critics, what was the real reason for his decision?
4. Why is Facebook becoming such an important way of mobilizing people concerned about a political issue like prorogation?

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Video Review

Quote

"I think the polls have been pretty clear that the detainee issue is not at the top of the radar for most Canadians. What's on the radar is the economy . . ." — Prime Minister Stephen Harper, as quoted in the *National Post*, January 5, 2010

Quote

"We need to kick and scream at this insult to democracy—because that is what it is. We need to support each other, efforts by other parties, non-political leadership. Harper's move . . . is premised on the assumption that enough Canadians simply do not care about democracy or the role of Parliament. . . . In the interests of democracy, let's hope this time his cynicism has miscalculated." — Elizabeth May, Green Party Leader, *Toronto Star*, January 1, 2010

Pre-viewing Questions

Make notes in response to the following questions. Then select a partner, or form a small group, and discuss your responses.

1. Do you believe there are certain conditions under which prisoners detained during war should be able to be tortured? Why?

2. If there are international laws and treaties that prohibit torture, should not Canada and all countries have to abide by those laws and treaties? Explain.

3. If you found out that Canadian soldiers or civilians were taken prisoner and tortured by Afghan authorities, how would you feel? Is the torture of Canadians any different from the torture of Afghans?

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. At the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, what did the Canadian military do with any prisoners they captured?

2. Why did they change that policy?

3. According to diplomat Richard Colvin, how many of the Afghan prisoners turned over to Afghan authorities were likely tortured?

4. Why did some members of Parliament challenge Colvin's testimony?

5. Do you believe their criticism of Colvin's testimony was valid? Why?

6. How did cabinet members in Prime Minister Harper's government, and senior military officials, react to Colvin's testimony?

7. After weeks of denying any knowledge of torture, why would General Walter Natynczyk change his testimony?

8. What strategy did the Harper government take to try to silence the opposition?

9. Why did Prime Minister Harper say he decided to prorogue Parliament?

10. What do critics give as the reason(s) for his decision?

11. How did Canadian citizens respond to the decision to prorogue? Provide specific examples.

12. Why was Terry Pozniack, the mother of a Canadian Forces soldier who was soon to be sent to Afghanistan, particularly upset by Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament?

Post-viewing Activities

1. Join your partner or small group again and review the responses you made to the Pre-viewing Questions. Have your responses changed now that you've watched the video? Explain in what ways they have or have not.

2. What impact, if any, will Prime Minister Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament have on his government's chances of victory in the next federal election, which may take place sometime in 2010?

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The Colvin Affair

“Canadian military officials don’t send individuals off to be tortured.” — Prime Minister Stephen Harper, April 25, 2007, *The Globe and Mail*, November 19, 2009

“That was indeed our official policy. But behind the military’s wall of secrecy, that, unfortunately, is exactly what we were doing.” — Canadian diplomat Richard Colvin, referring to Harper’s statement before a parliamentary committee, November 18, 2009, *The Globe and Mail*, November 19, 2009

Prior to his blockbuster testimony before a parliamentary subcommittee hearing on November 18, 2009, Richard Colvin was hardly a household name to most Canadians. A career diplomat with a distinguished 15-year record of service, Colvin is currently the deputy head of security and intelligence at the Canadian embassy in Washington.

But it was his experience as part of Canada’s mission to Afghanistan for 17 months in 2006 and 2007 that Colvin was referring to when he made his sensational charges of Afghan detainee abuse—specifically that Canadian troops serving in Afghanistan had routinely handed over detained insurgents to Afghan security forces, where they were almost always subjected to torture in order to extract information from them.

His Testimony

Colvin also pointed to a disturbing pattern of indifference and obstruction from senior political and military officials in Afghanistan and in Ottawa. Colvin claimed that on numerous occasions he tried to warn officials that this abuse—contrary to international laws that Canada supports—was taking place on a regular basis.

Colvin argued that the Canadian government’s and military’s “complicity in torture” of Afghan detainees was undermining the country’s efforts to subdue the Taliban and gain the confidence of the Afghan people, especially in the troubled southern province of Kandahar. In his words, “instead of winning hearts and minds, we caused Kandaharis to fear the foreigners. Canada’s detainee practices alienated us from the population and strengthened the insurgency” (*The Globe and Mail*, November 19, 2009).

In his testimony Colvin claimed that, beginning in May 2006, he had informed senior military officials such as Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, then commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He stated that Gauthier would almost certainly have relayed this information to the then Canadian Defence Staff commander General Rick Hillier in Ottawa.

He also alleged that his efforts to inform his diplomatic superiors and their political masters were routinely thwarted or ignored. He named a number of prominent figures, including David Mulroney, the former deputy minister of the government’s Afghan task force; Colleen Swords, a former deputy minister with the international security branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs; and David Sproule, then the Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan, as parties to what he alleged was a deliberate effort to cover up his warnings about the torture of detainees.

Response to His Testimony

Colvin’s sensational charges were met with denial and dismissal from the people he named and those at the top of the chain of command, including Hillier

Did you know . . .

In an interview with Peter Mansbridge of CBC's *The National* on January 5, 2010, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said that he did not think most Canadians were very concerned about the alleged torture of Afghan detainees, and were instead far more preoccupied with the state of the economy and the government's plans to deal with it when Parliament resumes on March 3, 2010.

Quote

"What he has been saying is what I've heard from my people." — Malalai Joya, a human rights activist and former Afghan parliament member, CBC News, November 26, 2009

and Defence Minister Peter MacKay. Hillier dismissed Colvin's testimony as "bull." He denied being made aware the potential abuse of Afghan detainees had ever occurred. In his words, although "we always had concerns" about the transfer of prisoners to Afghan authorities, "no smoking gun ever caught my attention" (*Toronto Star*, November 20, 2009).

MacKay sought to cast doubt on the credibility of Colvin's assertions, wondering why the diplomat had never raised the issue personally with him. He also counter-attacked by charging that Colvin's evidence would give a propaganda advantage to the Taliban in its campaign against Canadian forces. He suggested that Colvin was gullible to believe the claims of captured Taliban fighters that they had been tortured when there was no solid evidence this had ever taken place.

Support for Colvin

As a result of his headline-grabbing allegations, Richard Colvin was transformed from an "invisible man" to a celebrity and high-profile whistleblower of government misdeeds. His friends and colleagues in the diplomatic community regard him as a "consummate professional" and hardly as someone who would stake his reputation and future professional career on a set of reckless and unfounded allegations against prominent political and military officials. One long-time associate, who asked to

remain anonymous, described him as "a beta, not an alpha. He doesn't seek the spotlight. He's never the guy you would notice in the room" (*The Globe and Mail*, November 21, 2009).

Despite the heated denials of Colvin's claims by senior government and military officials, his accusations have more than a ring of truth to journalists who have covered the Afghan conflict. Graeme Smith of *The Globe and Mail* wrote in an editorial that he had "assembled substantial evidence of such torture" (November 20, 2009).

Colvin's many acquaintances in the diplomatic corps were quick to extend support to their embattled colleague. For example, Michael Semple, who served with the European Union's mission in Afghanistan at the same time that Colvin was there—and is considered an expert on the country's politics—was "totally flabbergasted" by the attacks on Colvin's credibility coming from Defence Minister Peter MacKay and other government officials. Echoing this view, Norine Macdonald, president of the International Council on Security and Development, an agency that operates field offices in three Afghan cities, commented that, "Richard Colvin is what I would call an old-fashioned Canadian diplomat—mild-mannered, sincere, admired and respected. He genuinely believes what it says in the civil service manual about representing Canada and Canadian values" (*The Globe and Mail*, November 21, 2009).

Analysis

1. What evidence is there to support Richard Colvin's claims that Afghan detainees captured by Canadian forces suffered torture after being transferred to that country's security agency? What evidence is there to refute it?
2. Why did the "Colvin affair" attract so much political and media attention after his testimony to a parliamentary committee on the alleged torture of Afghan detainees?
3. Do you agree with Stephen Harper's quote in the margin box that Canadians aren't that concerned about the alleged torture of Afghan detainees? Explain.

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Profile of Richard Colvin

Further Research

On December 16, 2009, in response to criticism of his testimony, Richard Colvin submitted another 16 pages of documentation showing when and how senior officials were notified of concerns about the torture of Afghan detainees. Read the supplemental report at www.cbc.ca/news/pdf/further-evidence-special-committee.pdf.

Richard Colvin was born in 1969 in Coventry, England, and moved with his family to Canada at the age of 16. The family settled in Waterdown, Ontario, where his father was an executive with the farm equipment manufacturer Massey Ferguson. His inspiration to follow a diplomatic career was an uncle who had served in the British Foreign Service. To prepare himself for the rigorous Foreign Service Examination, which every Canadian seeking a diplomatic position abroad must pass, he studied international relations and Russian at the University of Toronto.

After failing the examination on his first attempt, he moved to Moscow and found a job with USSR Business Reports, where he worked as a reporter for one year. He then returned to Canada where he completed a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in London, graduating at the top of his class. In 1992, he wrote the Foreign Service exam for a second time, on this occasion ranking first among the 7 000 applicants for Canadian diplomatic posts and finally clinching a position.

As a diplomat, Colvin was drawn to global conflict zones where Canada maintained a political or military presence because he enjoyed the “intensity” of such postings. Prior to his time in Afghanistan, he served in Sri Lanka, Moscow, and the Palestinian territories. After the end of his first marriage to a Russian woman he had met in Moscow he returned to Canada in 2005 and took a desk job in Calgary, developing “long-term” plans for the Department of Foreign Affairs.

He quickly became bored with this and jumped at the opportunity to work in Afghanistan, a country he knew practically nothing about at the time. There he assumed important responsibilities as head of the political section at the Canadian embassy in Kabul and *chargés d'affaires*, or deputy ambassador, standing in for Ambassador David Sproule during his many absences from the country. It was during this tour of duty that he first became aware of what he claims was the routine transfer of Afghan insurgents captured by Canadian forces to the Afghan National Directorate of Security, an agency notorious for its regular use of torture on those who fall into its hands.

Follow-up

In a small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Do you believe Richard Colvin's allegations? Why or why not?
2. What makes some people believable and others not? Is it personality characteristics, experience, attitude, reputation, or something else?
3. Why would a diplomat like Colvin make public statements like these if they were not true? Is there anything he stands to gain from making such allegations?

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The Use of Torture

Did you know . . .

Some historians believe that the decision by the United States to drop the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the Allied “saturation bombing” of German cities at the close of the war, could today be regarded as war crimes and crimes against humanity, since they especially targeted innocent civilians.

At the end of the Second World War, widespread evidence of the abuse and torture of prisoners of war (POWs) surfaced. When German soldiers were confronted with evidence that POWs in their captivity had been subjected to extremely brutal treatment, the soldiers claimed “they were only following orders” from senior officers. Similarly, Japanese military and political authorities excused their own mistreatment of Allied POWs—including Canadians captured after the fall of Hong Kong in 1941—by pleading that they were unaware of such incidents.

Neither of these justifications is given any recognition in international treaties outlawing the abuse of POWs that have been enacted since the Second World War. Ever since the Nuremberg War Crimes trials, held shortly after the end of the Second World War, the principle that countries engaged in conflict should not torture or otherwise mistreat POWs has been widely acknowledged.

Crimes against Humanity

In 2000, the Canadian Parliament passed the Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes Act. One of its clauses stipulates that if allegations of torture of POWs are made, then it is the duty of those officials acting in a position of “superior responsibility” to investigate the claims immediately. This law specifies two areas of responsibility: the military commander on the ground and a non-military person in authority, such as a senior government official. It also states that such individuals are liable to criminal charges should they fail to take all necessary measures to prevent such offences or pursue a full investigation of them.

In the decades following the end of the Second World War, there have been many cases where POWs have been tortured or mistreated—for example in the conflict that raged in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The United Nations’ International Criminal Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia found senior Serbian political and military leaders, including former president Slobodan Milosevic and General Radko Mladic, guilty of war crimes because they knew or should have known about the torture and killing of Bosnian Muslim POWs in their hands but failed to take action to prevent it.

Diplomat Richard Colvin stated before a Canadian parliamentary subcommittee in November 2009 that between April 2006 and October 2007 he had expressed his concerns about the torture of detainees transferred from Canadian forces to the Afghan security agency to about 70 high-ranking military and government officials. Prior to Colvin’s testimony, there were a number of reports from media sources, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and even other countries with troops fighting in Afghanistan that the torture of these detainees was taking place despite Canadian government denials. If Colvin’s allegations are valid, then according to experts such as Robin Rowland, a CBC News producer with a background in international law and the history of war crimes, a number of senior Canadian military and government officials could theoretically be indicted as war criminals and brought before an international tribunal (“Knowing about war crimes,” CBC News, www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/11/23/f-knowingaboutwarcrimes.html).

Quote

"Are we the kind of people who don't care when people are tortured, or are we the kind of people who do?" — Thomas Walkom, *Toronto Star* columnist, November 28, 2009

Quote

". . . turning prisoners over to the authorities of the sovereign nation that the United Nations and NATO had come to support was certainly not an unreasonable decision." —Major-General Lewis Mackenzie (retired), *The Globe and Mail*, November 25, 2009

However, Rowland and others who have studied recent incidents of allegations of abuse of POWs, or "illegal enemy combatants" as they have been called since the "war on terror" after the attacks of September 11, 2001, are extremely skeptical that any such tribunal might ever be convened to investigate the behaviour of the U.S. and other Western nations operating in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is because of another principle that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War—that of "victor's justice." This means that the winning side in a conflict is in a superior position to judge the actions of the vanquished, but not vice versa.

One of the perhaps unfortunate results of the "war on terror" has been the blurring of the line regarding who constitutes a prisoner of war and whether or not they are entitled to the protection of international treaties. The U.S., for example, has consistently defended its right to detain for an indefinite period in the Guantanamo Bay detention centre "illegal enemy combatants" believed to be linked to Al Qaeda.

Many commentators are disturbed by Colvin's allegations that Canadian forces in Afghanistan knew that their prisoners were likely to be tortured after being turned over to that country's brutal

security agency. *Globe and Mail* writer Rick Salutin argues that Canada's alleged complicity into the torture of Afghan detainees, "provides one more proof, a uniquely Canadian one, that the war on terror has become the chief incubator of terror, and recruitment for it, post-9/11" (November 20, 2009).

However, other voices have sought to put the Colvin affair into perspective by arguing that Canadian forces fighting in Afghanistan face a different kind of war, where the line between potential enemy fighters and innocent civilians is frequently difficult to determine. Historian J.L. Granatstein argues that supporters of Colvin are "stomping on the flag" and giving aid and comfort to Canada's enemies in Afghanistan by dwelling on his to-date unproven allegations of torture of detainees (*The Globe and Mail*, January 5, 2010). And retired Major-General Lewis Mackenzie, who once commanded a Canadian United Nations peacekeeping force in Bosnia, does not support calls that the Harper government should mount a full-scale inquiry into Colvin's allegations. Instead, he believes that the whole matter could be better handled by the Military Police Complaints Commission, an independent, quasi-judicial agency established in 1998.

Activities

1. Why did the treatment of POWs become such a major international issue after the Second World War and as a result of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s?
2. How has the "war on terror" after the attacks of September 11, 2001, changed perspectives on POWs and the rights to which they should be entitled under international law?
3. Summarize the viewpoints of the four commentators on the issue of the alleged torture of Afghan detainees and Canada's possible complicity in it. Which of them do you agree with, and why?
4. What do you think would be the best way for the Canadian government and military to deal with this issue?

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Prorogation of Parliament

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's December 31, 2009, decision to prorogue, or suspend, the current session of Parliament until March 3, 2010, touched off a great deal of controversy among Canadian political figures, media commentators, and ordinary citizens. Below you will find a selection of reactions to Harper's decision. For each quote, indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the comment. Then state your reason(s) for your position.

"Mr. Harper is a competent tactician with a ruthless streak. He bars most ministers from talking to the media; he has axed some independent watchdogs; he has binned campaign promises to make government more open and accountable. Now he is subjecting Parliament to prime-ministerial whim. He may be right that most Canadians care more about the luge [a reference to the February 2010 Winter Olympics] than the legislature, but that is surely only true while their decent system of government is in good hands. They may soon conclude that it isn't." — "Harper goes prorogue," *The Economist*, January 9, 2010

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

"This decision is about one thing and one thing only—avoiding the scrutiny of Parliament at a time when this government is facing tough questions about their conduct in covering up the detainee scandal. Mr. Harper is showing his disregard for the democratic institutions of our country. Harper is showing that his first impulse when he is in trouble is to shut down Parliament." — Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff, quoted in "Commons shut down, opposition furious," *Toronto Star*, December 31, 2009

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

"This kind of thing can't happen in the U.S. or most other parliaments—it's the kind of thing you hear of in dictatorships. It's a slap in the face and it's a denial of the democratic process. He has absolutely no good reason to prorogue the House." — NDP Leader Jack Layton, quoted in "Commons shut down, opposition furious," *Toronto Star*, December 31, 2009

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

“Political calculation is clearly behind the decision to prorogue. The Conservatives are hoping to bask in the glow of Olympic glory while dodging the mess and scrutiny of lawmaking. . . . Canada’s democracy should not be conducted solely on the basis of convenience for the governing party. If the debate over detainees cannot be carried out in Parliament, then it should continue among Canadians at large. On this and other important issues, the government cannot delay accountability forever.” — “Democracy diminished, accountability avoided,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 31, 2009

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

“While most Canadians couldn’t have defined the word *prorogue* a year ago, the term for suspending Parliament seems to be seeping into the public psyche. Some of the response to the parliamentary shutdown appears to fly in the face of predictions that Canadians are too bored or apathetic to care whether federal politicians have disappeared from the capital.” — Susan Delacourt and Richard J. Brennan, “Grassroots fury greets shuttered Parliament,” *Toronto Star*, January 5, 2010

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

“Ordinary Canadians don’t consider prorogation to be a big issue. I know it’s a big issue with the Ottawa media elite and some of the elites in our country, but I got to tell you if the reaction in my constituency is any indication, I’ve had maybe three dozen e-mails. It may not be what the chattering classes want, but we’re not here to govern on behalf of the chattering classes.” — Industry Minister Tony Clement, quoted in “Academics slam suspension of Parliament,” CBC News, www.cbc.ca/politics/story/2010/01/11/prorogue-protest-professors/html

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

“We can’t use prorogation to run from our problems. Canada knows that that can’t happen and we’re making sure that they all know that too.” — Brendan Sommerhalder, an organizer of the Halifax, Nova Scotia, anti-prorogation rally, January 23, 2010, quoted in “Thousands protest Parliament’s suspension” CBC News, www.cbc.ca/politics/story/2010/01/23/prorogue-protests.html

Strongly agree _____ **Agree** _____ **Disagree** _____ **Strongly disagree** _____

Reasons _____

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Technology and Democracy

In late October 2003, a heartbroken Harvard University student named Mark Zuckerberg was looking for something to distract him from a recent break-up with his girlfriend. He went online, posting his thoughts and some pictures for his friends to share and add their comments. This was the origin of Facebook, a social media site that now includes over 350 million people worldwide—12 million in Canada alone—many of them between the ages of 18 and 30. Zuckerberg and his partners are now very wealthy, and Facebook has become one of the most popular sites on the World Wide Web.

While most members use it to post news about their personal activities and keep in touch with friends, Facebook, along with other new social media sites like MySpace and Twitter, has recently become a forum for social and political activism. For many people, it has replaced e-mail and text messaging as a method of communication. And it provides a venue for bringing like-minded people together in support of a particular cause and keeping each other informed of events as they unfold.

Grassroots Opposition to Prorogation of Parliament

Canada saw a dramatic demonstration of this new information-age phenomenon in the days following the announcement that Prime Minister Stephen Harper had decided to prorogue Parliament on December 31, 2009. Christopher White, an anthropology student at the University of Alberta was still in his pajamas when he learned of Harper's decision. "My first reaction was anger," he said, "and then this time I was like 'OK, I should really do something about it instead of going and having cereal'" (CBC News,

www.cbc.ca/politics/story/2010/01/14/facebook-group-prorogation.html). What White did was create a Facebook group called Canadians against Proroguing Parliament, (CAPP) a site where people opposed to Harper's action could join to express their views and suggest ways to put pressure on their MPs to go back to work.

White's site quickly "went viral," to use the term referring to an instant Internet sensation. Within a week, over 40 000 Canadians had joined CAPP, and by January 23, the date the organization had set for a co-ordinated round of anti-prorogation rallies across Canada, over 200 000 people had signed on. This made CAPP by far the biggest politically oriented Facebook group ever to emerge in Canada, with more members than the total number of people belonging to the Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Green, and Bloc Quebecois leaders' Facebook groups combined. Clearly this was a new phenomenon in Canadian politics, belying the notion that most people, especially youth, were apathetic and cynical about the actions of their political leaders, believing there was not much they could do to influence public issues.

However, some media and political commentators were initially skeptical about the impact and significance of CAPP. Conservative spokespersons pointed to polls taken shortly after Harper's announcement indicating that most people were either not aware of prorogation or did not care much about it. But these polling numbers shifted dramatically in the weeks that followed, and by late January an EKOS poll found that almost two-thirds of respondents believed that Harper's decision to prorogue Parliament was

“undemocratic,” while almost half of them held the view that the government was “moving in the wrong direction” (“Prorogation tightens gap between Tories, Liberals,” CBC News www.cbc.ca/politics/story/2010/01/13/ekos-conservatives-liberals-poll-prorogation-suspension.html).

The same poll revealed that the Conservative lead over the Liberals, which had been as high as 15 per cent before prorogation, had now evaporated, and the two parties were in a virtual dead heat in their respective levels of popular support. While it is not possible to establish a direct cause-and-effect relationship, these major shifts in public opinion were occurring at the same time that thousands of people were joining the CAPP Facebook site daily.

National Post correspondent Matt Gurney argued that, “Facebook groups are just about the dumbest way to advocate a political cause” (*The Globe and Mail*, January 11, 2010), but the success of CAPP in rallying Canadians of all ages and backgrounds against prorogation seemed to suggest otherwise. David Evans, a journalist with *The Globe and Mail* (January 11, 2010), suggested that Prime Minister Harper and his Conservative government were ignoring social media groups like CAPP “at their peril,” because they were underestimating the depth and breadth of public opposition and outrage at their decision to suspend Parliament. Evans pointed to the fact that Harper’s prorogation announcement was made just before New Year’s, perhaps deliberately timed to attract little public attention as people planned for the holiday. But Facebook groups like CAPP break this pattern, keeping “old” news stories alive and continuing to fuel public awareness and anger as new members log on to the site.

What do we know about the Canadians

who are joining CAPP and participating in anti-prorogation rallies? A study by the prestigious Rideau institute, titled “Facebook and Prorogation” (January 21, 2010), interviewed 340 members to find out. The study found that despite widespread impressions that Facebook is popular mostly with young people, members of CAPP spanned all age groups. For many of its older members, it was the first time they had ever signed on to a Facebook group. It also found that CAPP members were more politically informed than average Canadians and far more likely to vote in federal elections. When asked about their motives for joining the group, most people indicated that they felt that prorogation was undemocratic and that Parliament should have remained in session in order to investigate the Afghan detainee issue more fully. A large majority of the CAPP members surveyed stated that they believed joining the group and participating in demonstrations would have a positive impact and compel the government to reconsider its move to prorogue Parliament.

CAPP organizers held their collective breaths as they planned cross-Canada rallies for January 23, 2010. How many of those who had signed on to the site would actually brave the cold Canadian weather on a Saturday afternoon and take to the streets to protest prorogation? Some skeptics in the media had suggested that the demonstrations would flop, because “joining a Facebook group is easy, while marching is hard” (“Thousands protest Parliament’s suspension,” CBC News, www.cbc.ca/politics/story/2010/01/23/prorogue-protests.html).

But the rallies were a huge success, exceeding even their organizers’ expectations, with thousands of people participating in rallies in over 60 cities and towns across the country. On the

steps of the House of Commons in Ottawa, over 3 500 people gathered to hear political leaders like Michael Ignatieff, Jack Layton, and Elizabeth May denounce Harper's move and call for an immediate resumption of Parliament. As Sonya Stranger, aged 18, commented while taking part in the Regina protest, "it's about the masses and their voice being heard. You know, representation of the masses, and that's not what's happening right now"

(CBC News, www.cbc.ca/politics/story/2010/01/23/prorogue-protests.html).

If Stranger's views are indicative of the feelings of CAPP members—of all ages and walks of life—then the coming months could be somewhat difficult for the Harper government as it attempts to justify to the Canadian people its controversial decision to prorogue Parliament.

Activities

1. Can social media sites like Facebook play a significant role in involving young people in the political process? Why or why not?
2. Why did some political and media commentators dismiss the Facebook group Canadians against Proroguing Parliament when it was first formed? Were their dismissals justified? Why or why not?
3. Will Facebook sites and demonstrations have any impact on the government's decision to prorogue Parliament? Why or why not?
4. Would you join a political group on Facebook or become involved in a political protest organized via Facebook? Why or why not?

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Activity: Position Paper

Further Research

A good guide to writing a position paper can be found at: www.sfu.ca/mns/130d1/WritingaPositionPaper.htm

What is a Position Paper?

A position paper is like one side of a debate, only in written form. It is a piece of writing that presents an opinion or point of view on an important public issue. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as an “opinion piece.” Newspaper columnists express their views on issues such as the Afghan detainee affair or Prime Minister Harper’s decision to prorogue Parliament through what are known as “op-ed” columns that appear in daily newspapers in Canada and other countries. Some of these, by journalists like the *Toronto Star’s* Thomas Walkom or *The Globe and Mail’s* Rick Salutin have been referred to in this *News in Review* story. Unlike news reports, op-ed pieces or position papers do not have to be neutral or unbiased. Instead, they are expected to take a position on a controversial issue and present a series of arguments in support of it. Sometimes position papers will also present counter-arguments that might be advanced to the point of view being expressed, in order to refute them.

Your Task

Your assignment is to write a position paper on whether or not the prime minister of Canada should have the power to prorogue Parliament any time he or she wishes. In researching your position paper, you may wish to consult resources such as newspaper and magazine articles and online information. Some of the sources cited in this story may be helpful to you in doing your research.

Format

- The position paper should consist of an introductory paragraph in which you state your thesis or the point of view that you will be developing throughout the paper (i.e., the prime minister should or should not have the power to prorogue Parliament any time he or she wishes).
- Following the introduction, the body of your paper should consist of at least three paragraphs, each one presenting a different argument supporting your position. These points must be supported by evidence or facts and can also refer to recognized authorities (political or media commentators, for example) who have presented similar arguments to the ones you are including in your position paper.
- After you have presented your three main arguments, your paper should end with a conclusion in which you briefly restate your argument and perhaps appeal to your readers to take action on the issue if they feel so inclined.

Your position paper may contain direct quotes from sources you have used in your research. If it does, then these sources must be cited using the proper format. You may also wish to include a short bibliography or list of sources you cited or drew on in the preparation of your paper.

Your teacher may wish to provide you with more detailed instructions about how to research and write a position paper, what citation format he or she wishes you to use and the length of the paper.