

Tories blasted for handbook on paralyzing Parliament

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OTTAWA (CP) - The Harper government is being accused of a machiavellian plot to wreak parliamentary havoc after a secret Tory handbook on obstructing and manipulating Commons committees was leaked to the press.

Opposition parties pounced on news reports Friday about the 200-page handbook as proof that the Conservatives are to blame for the toxic atmosphere that has paralyzed Parliament this week.

"The government's deliberate plan is to cause a dysfunctional, chaotic Parliament," Liberal House Leader Ralph Goodale told the House of Commons.

New Democrat Libby Davies said the manual explodes the Tories' contention that opposition parties are to blame for the parliamentary constipation.

"So much for blaming the opposition for the obstruction of Parliament," she said.

"Now we learn, in fact, that the monkey wrench gang have had a plan all along and not just any plan, a 200-page playbook on how to frustrate, obstruct and shut down the democratic process."

Bloc Quebecois MP Monique Guay said the manual demonstrates the government's "flagrant lack of respect" for the democratic process.

The opposition demanded that the manual, given to Tory committee chairs, be tabled in the House of Commons.

Peter Van Loan, the government's House leader, ignored the demand and continued to insist that the Tories want the minority Parliament to work.

He again blamed the opposition parties for its recent dysfunction. He cited various justice bills which have been stalled by opposition MPs in committees for up to 214 days.

"The opposition pulls out every stop they can to obstruct (the justice agenda) and then they get upset when a matter gets debated for two hours at committee," he scoffed.

But Van Loan's arguments were weakened by the leak of the manual. The government was so embarrassed and annoyed by the leak, that, according to a source, it ordered all committee chairs to return their copies of the handbook, apparently in a bid to determine who broke confidence.

The handbook reportedly advises chairs on how to promote the government's agenda, select witnesses



Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan stands in the House of Commons during Question Period, Friday May 18, 2007.(CP PHOTO/Fred Chartrand) Canada

friendly to the Conservative party and coach them to give favourable testimony. It also reportedly instructs them on how to filibuster and otherwise disrupt committee proceedings and, if all else fails, how to shut committees down entirely.

Some of those stalling tactics have been on display this week.

Tory MPs on the information and ethics committee stalled an inquiry into alleged censorship of a report on the treatment of Afghan detainees. They debated the propriety of the witness list for more than five hours while two critics of the government's handling of the matter cooled their heels in the corridor.

The official languages committee has been shut down all week after Tory chair Guy Lauzon cancelled a hearing moments before witnesses were to testify about the impact of the government's cancellation of the court challenges program. All three opposition parties voted to remove Lauzon from the chair but the Tories are refusing to select a replacement, leaving the committee in limbo.

Tories have also launched filibusters to obstruct proceedings in the Commons agriculture and procedural affairs committees and a Senate committee study of a Liberal bill requiring the government to adhere to the Kyoto treaty on greenhouse gas emissions.

The previous Liberal regime also tried to control the conduct of committees. Former prime minister Jean Chretien even faced a mini-rebellion during his final months in office from backbenchers who chafed at being told what to say and do at committee. They demanded the right to choose their own committee chairs.

But Davies, a 10-year parliamentary veteran, said the Tories have taken manipulation to extremes she's never seen before.

"They've codified it. They've set it down. They've given instructions."

Both Davies and Goodale agreed that the recent dysfunction may be part of a long term Tory strategy to persuade voters that minority Parliaments don't work, that they need to elect a majority next time.

But Goodale predicted the ploy won't work because Canadians will realize that the Tories are the "authors of this stalemate."

Goodale said the manual also demonstrates that the government is in the grip of an "obsessive, manipulative mania," run by a prime minister who has "a kind of control fetish" in which there can't be "one comma or one sentence or one word uttered without his personal approval."

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