

# Aussie coalition shows losers can win

Canadians looking for ways to oust Stephen Harper's Conservatives will be cheered by news that a new centre-left coalition has taken power in Australia.

They shouldn't be too cheered.

The decision by two independent legislators to support Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Australian Labor Party ended more than a fortnight of uncertainty, following an election in which neither of the country's two major parties secured enough seats to form a majority government.

More to the point for Canada, Tuesday's deal puts the lie to Harper's claim that "losers" can't form coalition governments.

The Canadian Prime Minister used this argument successfully in late 2008 to ward off an attempt by the Liberals and New Democrats (backed by the Bloc Québécois) to replace his minority government with a centre-left coalition.



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Harper said that since his Conservatives had won more seats than any other single party he had a unique moral right to govern.

His argument so spooked the Liberals that the opposition deal fell apart.

Even the coalition government that emerged from this year's closely fought British election seemed to reinforce Harper's point about moral authority.

Although the kingmakers in that contest, the Liberal Democrats, had more in common ideologically with Britain's Labour Party, they

chose to support David Cameron's right-wing Conservatives.

Stripped to its essentials, the Lib Dems' argument was that since Cameron had won more seats than his Labour opponents, he deserved to govern.

But in Australia, it is the losers who are on top.

In every conceivable way — except the most important — Gillard's Labor lost the Aug. 21 election. Australian Electoral Commission figures show that it took one fewer seat than the opposition Liberal Nationals, themselves a complex right-wing coalition.

The Liberal Nationals even had a bigger portion of the popular vote — 44 per cent to Labor's 38.

Politically, the election was a repudiation of the Labor government — of its vacillating position on climate change, of the brutal internal coup that saw Gillard replace former prime minister

Kevin Rudd, of its confused approach to taxing resource companies.

Yet in the end, Labor emerged victorious. The reason? In politics, moral authority doesn't matter. What matters is cobbling together enough votes to dominate a legislature.

And in this case, by offering a raft of goodies (and one cabinet seat) to two rural independents, Gillard has managed to form a fragile majority government that she hopes will last three years.

That could be the reality in Canada after the next election. If, as polling now suggests, no single party wins an outright majority — and if the results are close enough — the road will be open to a coalition government of some kind.

This is what serious proponents of an NDP-Liberal deal contemplate. They are not talking about fielding joint candidates. In most

ridings, rank-and-file members of both parties wouldn't stand for such an arrangement.

They certainly aren't talking of merging. Save for their antipathy toward Harper, the Liberals and New Democrats have little in common. What they are talking about is post-election horse-trading.

The Australian example shows that after such horse-trading, it's possible for losers to win. In fact, it shows that after a very close race, it's possible for anyone to win.

In backroom talks following a tight election, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff might be able to woo MPs from other parties with offers of cabinet posts and money. But then so might Harper.

Thomas Walkom's column appears Wednesday and Saturday.

**AUSTRALIAN ELECTION:** Julia Gillard to lead government, **A17**