

## Cabinet Told How to Vote by the PMO—(Again!)

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Last Wednesday, the House of Commons was the scene of another national tragedy, as the PM's highest-ranking ministers submitted to being ordered about, either directly by the PM or by his "boys in short pants" as the media calls them—the staffers who are charged with ensuring a united front on difficult social issues. One would like to think that ministers of federal departments were selected for their wisdom, their commitment to principles and for the creative thinking that they bring to the table on important issues. How humiliating for them and how embarrassing for the public to learn that the PM does not trust those whom he has selected for these responsible positions to make responsible decisions on behalf of their constituents and citizens across the country.

Bill C-560—the Equal Shared Parenting Bill introduced by MP Maurice Vellacott—would have fundamentally transformed the way courts handle parental involvement with their children in the unfortunate event of divorce. All Canadians recognize the emotional challenges for children when their parents separate. Most Canadians recognize the unfair presumptions made in many divorce settlements where one parent (usually the mother) is granted "custody" while the other parent is relegated to the status of a dependant, needing to coax, persuade and otherwise convince his or her former spouse that he or she deserves some meaningful time with the children they brought into the world together and for whom they have a shared responsibility.

Not everyone will agree (of course) that equal shared parenting is the best model. That's why votes are taken in the House. However, it's a remarkable bit of mathematical happenstance that 33 members of the Harper Cabinet voted against the bill and none voted for it. Six, including Mr Harper himself, did not vote and presumably were absent. Among other Conservatives, including our reliable pro-life friends, most supported the bill. Most of the 80 MPs who supported the bill were Conservatives. The NDP and the Liberals voted against it en masse. Elizabeth May supported the bill. It is obvious that political calculations that go far beyond the merits or shortcomings of this proposed legislation have prompted the leaders of the largest three parties to pressure their members—in this case the Conservative Cabinet—to defeat this legislation.

I certainly have been impressed with the thought and care that Mr. Vellacott put into this bill, with the express purpose of improving the lives of children who are caught in the emotional pressure of divorce and their longing for and need of strong relationships with both parents. The initiative he has taken will no doubt be revisited at some future time when—hopefully—a concern for children will outweigh partisan posturing.

It puzzles me that the Prime Minister or those in his inner circle would feel so threatened by this sincere attempt to improve the outcomes for Canadian children. One can't help feeling that political expediency has once again trumped the principles of "democratic parliamentary institutions" which the Conservative Party says it adheres to. On some other issues the PM has allowed his cabinet to vote according to

conscience. Why did he feel that Equal Shared Parenting was an issue on which his hand-picked ministers could not be trusted?

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## **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> [www.chp.ca/get-involved](http://www.chp.ca/get-involved)