

# HARPER'S THRONE SPEECH CHALLENGE

## Introduction

### Focus

This *News in Review* story looks at the Harper government's fall 2007 Throne Speech. Drawing on public reluctance for a third election in three and a half years, the Harper Conservatives put forward a bold agenda and dared the opposition parties to bring down their minority government.

### Further Research

The complete text and video of the Speech from the Throne may be read at [www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp](http://www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp).

For people who like watching political chess played out in the halls of power, Ottawa was the place to be in the fall of 2007. Despite public opinion polls that suggested a fall election might not give him a majority, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a number of bold political moves that put the Liberals on the defensive and reduced his other political opponents to mere voices crying in the wilderness. The Prime Minister flexed his political muscles and watched his challengers cower in confusion.

### Laying the Groundwork

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, an accomplished political strategist according to many pundits, was in high gear in the lead-up to his government's Speech from the Throne. Sensing opposition vulnerability, Harper sought to outmaneuver the opposition going into the next session of Parliament. First, he met with the media and warned that his Throne Speech had better be accepted both after its reading and during its implementation period or Canadians would be going to the polls.

Harper was aware of two things: he could blame the opposition for triggering an election if they rejected his Throne Speech agenda and the electorate was likely to turn on the party who forced them to the polls for the third time in three and a half years. Next, Harper made it clear that he felt Canada should remain in Afghanistan until 2011. But, in order to be fair, he would ask a blue-ribbon study group to examine the issue before he put an extension of the Afghan mission to a vote in the House of Commons.

In an apparent slap in the face of his Liberal rivals, Harper appointed former Chrétien cabinet minister John Manley to the panel. Finally, he began acting

as if he had a majority in the House of Commons. He refused to meet with Stéphane Dion, the Liberal leader and Leader of the Official Opposition, prior to the reading of the Throne Speech. He even refused to entertain the idea of amendments to any aspect of the Throne Speech. In essence, Harper threw down the gauntlet and dared his opponents—particularly the Liberals—to cross him.

### The Throne Speech

A shell-shocked opposition watched the Governor General read the Speech from the Throne and hoped that they wouldn't be forced to topple Harper. The speech itself set out five priorities: making Canada stronger at home and abroad, strengthening federal-provincial relations, reducing taxes, setting new environmental goals, and establishing a plan to get tough on crime.

Most Canadians greeted the Throne Speech with mild ambivalence to its contents and visible anxiety at the prospect of another election. For their part, the opposition parties demonstrated a mixed reaction. The New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Bloc Québécois (BQ) immediately told reporters that they would vote against the Harper agenda. Meanwhile the Liberals hinted that they would not vote against it, but did not come out and commit to détente in the battle with Harper's Conservatives.

According to backroom Liberals, Stéphane Dion was ready to go the polls. Harper had gone too far to embarrass them—particularly in his Throne Speech comment that all but declared that Canada had abandoned the Kyoto Protocol (a Dion achievement) by failing to reduce greenhouse emissions during the previous decade (when the Liberals were in power). News reports confirmed

### Further Research

To stay informed about the activities of Canada's major federal parties, consider regular visits to their official Web sites: Conservative Party ([www.conservative.ca](http://www.conservative.ca)), Liberal Party ([www.liberal.ca](http://www.liberal.ca)), New Democratic Party ([www.ndp.ca](http://www.ndp.ca)), Bloc Québécois ([www.blocquebecois.org](http://www.blocquebecois.org)) and Green Party ([www.greenparty.ca](http://www.greenparty.ca)).

### Definition

An *omnibus bill* refers to a proposed law that contains many proposals on a certain theme, such as crime. It is sometimes used by a government to cow the opposition by presenting it with an "all or nothing" strategy.

that Dion had to be talked out of bringing down the government and, by the time the Throne Speech was put to a vote, the Liberals were saying things like "there's no poison pill here" and "Canadians are electioned-out" to put their supporters at ease (cbc.ca: "No 'poisoned pills' in Throne Speech: Ignatieff"). To demonstrate their protest but not cause an election, the Liberals chose to abstain from voting on the Throne Speech. Thus, the Harper agenda was allowed to move forward.

Essentially the Liberals found themselves caught between the so-called rock and a hard place. To bring down the Harper Conservatives would surely mean defeat in the next election. Canadians were tired of federal elections and, with two provinces (Ontario and Saskatchewan) coming out of fall elections, the Liberals could get slaughtered at the polls for triggering another vote.

Then there was the problem of Dion himself. Conservative attack ads painted him as incompetent. Though Canadians aren't particularly fond of attack ads, Dion's autumn performance was anything but stellar. When asked if he would vote against the Throne Speech, Dion was initially elusive, which did not play well in the press. Later, when asked about the hated Goods and Services Tax (GST), Dion suggested that he would consider reversing Conservative GST cuts and return the tax to seven per cent if elected—a position his caucus

comrades scrambled to correct after Dion's statement. Then, when former prime minister Brian Mulroney was accused of shady business practices, Dion stood up in the House of Commons and demanded a full public inquiry—after Harper had just announced he was calling a public inquiry into the matter.

### Full Steam Ahead

Meanwhile, the Conservatives were able to put in motion their Throne Speech plans. The timing of widespread tax cuts left the opposition vulnerable through the spring, with retroactive income-tax cuts that promised to put hundreds of dollars in refunds back into taxpayer bank accounts. An omnibus crime bill passed with some rumblings, and election speculation soon petered out. A plan to build an Arctic research centre stood to improve Canada's standing in the Far North, and the federal-provincial program announcement seemed to ease the often volatile relationship between Ottawa and the provinces. In terms of Afghanistan, Harper's team made it clear they wanted to stay until 2011. But they would wait for the report of the blue-ribbon study group and then debate the issue in the House. By the time the first snow flakes fell, the chess match was over. The Harper challenge had been met with weakness by some and surrender by others. This left the Conservatives awash in confidence going into 2008.

### Questions

1. What groundwork did Harper's Conservatives lay down to ensure the passage of the Throne Speech?
2. How did the opposition react to the Throne Speech?
3. Describe the Liberal conundrum and Stéphane Dion's performance in and around the time of the Throne Speech.

### Follow up

1. "Full steam ahead" is an idiom. Use a dictionary to define the word *idiom*. What is meant by the idiom *full steam ahead*?
2. There are two more idioms used in this story: "throw down the gauntlet" and "between a rock and a hard place." What do these idioms mean?

# HARPER'S THRONE SPEECH CHALLENGE

## *Video Review*

Watch the video and answer the following questions.

1. What is a Throne Speech?

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2. What challenge did Prime Minister Harper issue to his opponents prior to delivering the Throne Speech?

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3. a) What would voting against the Throne Speech mean for the future of Harper's government?

\_\_\_\_\_

b) What is a confidence vote?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. a) In the speech itself, the Harper government identifies a number of priorities. What are the government's plans for the following:

Afghanistan

\_\_\_\_\_

The Arctic

\_\_\_\_\_

The Environment

\_\_\_\_\_

Taxation

\_\_\_\_\_

Crime

\_\_\_\_\_

b) Identify the Throne Speech issues that were of concern to the following people:

Amanda Taylor \_\_\_\_\_

Phillip and Alberta Ferguson \_\_\_\_\_

Korin Eggington \_\_\_\_\_

Dustin Taylor \_\_\_\_\_

5. What course of action did Stéphane Dion opt for in response to a vote on the Throne Speech?

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# HARPER'S THRONE SPEECH CHALLENGE

## Throne Speech Highlights

### Throne Speech Quote

"Defending our sovereignty in the North also maintains the capacity to act. New Arctic patrol ships and expanded aerial surveillance will guard Canada's Far North and the Northwest Passage."

### Throne Speech Quote

"Our Government does not believe that Canada should simply abandon the people of Afghanistan after February 2009. Canada should build on its accomplishments and shift to accelerate the training of Afghan army and police so that the Afghan government can defend its own sovereignty."

### Throne Speech Quote

"Unfortunately much of this legislation did not pass. That is not good enough to maintain the confidence of Canadians."

Review the following Throne Speech highlights and complete the activity that follows.

### A Stronger Canada: The Arctic and the Provinces Arctic Sovereignty

- Open an Arctic research station in Canada's Far North
- Complete a detailed map of Canada's Arctic seabed
- Deploy Arctic patrol ships and increase aerial surveillance of Canada's Arctic

### Federal-Provincial Relations

- The federal government's ability to spend money on shared-cost programs in provincial jurisdictions will be limited
- Provinces and territories will be allowed to opt out of compatible government programs with compensation from the federal government

### Afghanistan

- Extend the Canadian mission in Afghanistan from February 2009 to March 2011
- Focus of the mission: training the Afghan army and police
- Hold a vote in the House of Commons following the release of a blue-ribbon study group looking into the issue

### Fighting Crime

- Re-introduce crime fighting laws that did not pass before the summer recess in one omnibus piece of legislation called the Tackling Violent Crime Bill
- Toughen laws dealing with impaired driving
- Toughen the Youth Criminal Justice Act

- Raise the age of sexual consent from 14 to 16
- Create stricter bail conditions for people charged with violent crimes
- Impose mandatory prison sentences for people convicted of gun crimes

### Improving the Environment

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60 to 70 per cent by 2050
- Phase one of the plan would see greenhouse gas emissions reduced by 20 per cent by 2020

### The Economy

- \$60-billion in tax cuts over the next six years (see October 2007 Economic Statement below)

### The October 2007 Economic Statement

Two weeks after the Throne Speech, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty issued his government's economic statement outlining the state of the Canadian economy and how the Harper Conservatives planned to introduce new tax cuts totalling \$60-billion over the next six years. Flaherty had the luxury of working with a \$13.8-billion budget surplus—over \$4-billion higher than projected in Harper's March budget.

- GST to be reduced to 5 per cent from 6 per cent effective January 2008; the government projects that \$12-billion will flow into the economy as a result of the GST reduction
- The basic personal amount of earning prior to taxes is increased to \$9 600 retroactive to January 2007; further increase to \$10 100 slated for January 2009

**Throne Speech Quote**

"Canada's emissions cannot be brought to the level required under the Kyoto Protocol within the compliance period..."

- The lowest personal income tax rate is reduced by half a percentage point to 15 per cent retroactive to January 2007; income tax cuts stand to put \$200 back in the hands of Canadians making close to \$40 000
- Reduction of the corporate income tax rate to 15 per cent by 2012 (from

22 per cent in 2007) with a 1 per cent reduction starting in 2008

- Reduction of the small business income tax rate to 11 per cent in 2008 (one year ahead of schedule)

Source: Department of Finance Canada, "Government of Canada is reducing taxes to lowest level in 50 years." (November 21, 2007)

**Throne Speech Quotes**

Source for all Throne Speech quotes: cbc.ca. "Throne Speech zeroes in on taxes, crime, extending Afghan mission" (October 16, 2007)

**Activity**

Make and complete a chart that examines the pros and cons of the Harper agenda. The chart should be structured as follows:

Theme	Pros	Cons
A Stronger Canada: The Arctic / Federal-Provincial Relations		
Afghanistan		
Fighting Crime		
The Environment		
The Economy/Tax Relief		

# HARPER'S THRONE SPEECH CHALLENGE

## *The Throne Speech*

### Further Research

To learn more about the nature and workings of Canada's Parliament, visit the official parliamentary Web site at [www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca). If you would like to know more about the mother of all Parliaments, consider a visit to the Web site of the British Parliament at [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Did you know . . .

In England, the knock of the Usher of the Black Rod is traditionally greeted with a slamming of the door of the House in the face of the Usher. However, in Canada, the Usher simply encounters a locked door signifying the elected members' right to govern without the intervention of the Queen.

### What is a Speech from the Throne?

Every time a new parliamentary session opens, a speech outlining the Government's agenda is read to members of Parliament. Because Canada is a constitutional monarchy, the speech is read by the Queen's representative: the Governor General at the federal level or the Lieutenant Governor at the provincial and territorial level. The speech itself is written by the Government—the ruling party that won the most seats in the House of Commons in the previous election. The speech is an extremely important vision statement for the ruling party. It essentially is a public declaration of what the Government plans on doing for Canadians on both domestic and foreign fronts. In the case of the Harper government's 2007 Throne Speech, the ruling Conservatives focused on five priorities: the war in Afghanistan, making Canada stronger, the environment, taxation, and crime.

### What Happens on the Day of the Throne Speech?

In the fall of 2007, the Harper government delivered its second Throne Speech. The Speech from the Throne is a major event in Ottawa, filled with pomp and tradition. About an hour before the speech, Governor General Michaëlle Jean left her residence in Rideau Hall and was taken by horse-drawn carriage to Parliament Hill. Four Mounties in full dress uniform accompanied her on the short journey. Upon her arrival, she inspected a Canadian Forces honour guard and, prior to her entry into the Parliament building, she was given a 21-gun salute. Once inside, Her Excellency was greeted by Prime Minister Harper

and began to prepare for the procession to the Senate chamber.

Tradition dictates that the Throne Speech must be delivered in the Senate because the Queen and her representatives are not allowed in the House of Commons. Tradition also dictates that members of the House of Commons are not allowed to enter the Senate chamber, so the ceremonial gatekeeper of the Senate, the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, plays the role of inviting the Governor General, the Prime Minister, dignitaries, and members of the House of Commons into the Senate. The Usher of the Black Rod is the only person who is allowed to enter both the Senate and the House of Commons, and parliamentarians are only allowed into the Senate on the Usher's invitation.

On the day in question, the procession began with the Usher of the Black Rod, Terrance Christopher, leaving the Senate and proceeding down the hallway to the main doors of the House of Commons. Upon his arrival, the Usher knocked on the door of the House three times with a three-foot-long ceremonial black rod. People outside the House could hear the door being unlocked before the Usher of the Black Rod was greeted by the Sergeant-at-Arms of the House, Kevin Vickers. The Sergeant-at-Arms turned and asked the Speaker of the House if the Usher of the Black Rod could enter the House. Once permission was granted, the Sergeant-at-Arms escorted the Usher of the Black Rod inside and, shortly thereafter, the members of the House of Commons prepared to leave the assembly.

The Usher of the Black Rod then left the House of Commons and proceeded to the Senate chamber followed by the Governor General, the Prime Minister,

**Further Research**

A visit to the Privy Council Office at [www.pco-bcp.gc.ca](http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca) can lead to a review of several previous examples of Speeches from the Throne.

gathered dignitaries, and members of the House of Commons. Once inside, the stage was set for the reading of the Speech from the Throne. Michaëlle Jean read the speech for about 40 minutes. She sat on a throne made of oak that is reserved for the head of state or his/her

representative. Once the speech was completed, the Usher of the Black Rod instructed the members of the House of Commons to leave the Senate. Then, he led the Governor General, the Prime Minister, and the dignitaries out of the chamber.

**Questions**

1. Why is the Speech from the Throne so important to Canadians?

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2. Describe some of the tradition and ceremony that accompanies the Throne Speech.

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3. Who is the Usher of the Black Rod? Describe his responsibilities.

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4. Who is the Sergeant-at-Arms?

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5. What role does the Governor General play in the Throne Speech?

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6. What is your personal opinion of the many formalities and traditions that surround the reading of the Speech from the Throne? Explain fully.

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# HARPER'S THRONE SPEECH CHALLENGE

## *Voices: Before and After the Throne Speech*

### Definition

A *caucus* refers to the gathering of the legislative members of a single political party. Canadian caucuses meet regularly to discuss issues and plan strategy.

Review the following quotes and complete the activity that follows.

### Rumblings before the Throne Speech

Prior to the Speech from the Throne, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a number of warnings to the opposition parties in Ottawa. Here are two of his warnings:

“The choice is: You either force us to election or give us this mandate.”

“You know, there is a fish or cut bait on this. You can't pass the Throne Speech one day and the next day say, ‘Well, we didn't actually mean to do it or we didn't actually give you a mandate.’ We will take it as a mandate, and we will take it as an ongoing question of confidence to get those things done.”

### The Speech from the Throne

On the day of the Throne Speech, Governor General Michaëlle Jean delivered the Harper agenda in the Senate chamber of the House of Commons. Here are a few excerpts:

“The Speech from the throne is an important moment in our country's democratic life.”

“It is now widely understood that, because of inaction on greenhouse gases over the last decade, Canada's emissions cannot be brought to the level required under the Kyoto Protocol within the compliance period, which begins on January 1, 2008, just 77 days from now.”

“In the last session, our Government introduced important and timely legislation to tackle violent crime. Unfortunately, most of this legislation

did not pass. That is not good enough to maintain the confidence of Canadians. Our Government will immediately re-introduce these measures with a single comprehensive Tackling Violent Crime Bill.”

### After the Throne Speech

After the Speech from the Throne was delivered, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion found himself in a difficult situation. Opposing the speech by way of a vote in the House of Commons would bring down the government, thus triggering an election that public opinion polls clearly suggested Canadians did not want. This dilemma put Dion on the defensive. Here are a few quotes delivered in the aftermath of the Throne Speech:

“We know that Canadians want as a priority this Parliament to work. They don't want a third election in three years and a half. So we'll have a real lively caucus tomorrow.” — Stéphane Dion, Leader of the Official Opposition and Leader of the Liberal Party

“We are looking at what we think of as a disappointing speech, a vague speech. . . . I don't see any poisoned pills here, I see studied ambiguity.” — Michael Ignatieff, Liberal MP

“I told you two days ago I was a hawk. . . [T]hat remains my position, and I think that the Government . . . needs to be brought down.” — Garth Turner, Liberal MP

“Never before has a federal Government fallen on the basis of a Throne Speech.” — Stéphane Dion

**Quote**

Although the Green Party does not have a seat in the House of Commons, its leader, Elizabeth May, still commented on the political wheeling and dealing around the Speech from the Throne. She noted: "We no longer have time for political games. We have to move decisively to protect our children's future" (www.greenparty.ca/en/node/3039).

"It is up to us, our caucus, to decide whether the time has come to have an election. In our judgment, I think in Canadian judgment, it is not that time."  
— Stéphane Dion

"[Dion] . . . reminded me a little bit of the professor who goes through your term paper and marks all over it everything he disagrees with it, but then passes you anyway." — Prime Minister Stephen Harper responding to Dion's criticisms of the Throne Speech

"We will be seeking timely passage of this legislation, and as is the case with confidence measures, the Government will not accept amendments to the substance of these initiatives." — Prime Minister Stephen Harper

". . . our members will be in place for each and every vote, and we will rise when it is our turn to vote and demonstrate clearly our opposition to the wrong direction that this Government is taking Canada." — Jack Layton, Leader of the NDP

Source: *CBC News in Review*, November 2007; cbc.ca

**Activity**

- 1. Review the quotes in the first section. Identify the specific warnings that Harper is issuing to his opponents. Why do you think he was so confident?

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- 2. Review the quotes in the second section entitled "The Speech from the Throne." What is the deeper meaning or subtext behind each quote?

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- 3. Review the quotes in the third section entitled "After the Throne Speech." Describe the attitude of the Liberals, Conservatives, and the NDP.

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# HARPER'S THRONE SPEECH CHALLENGE

## *Writing Activity*

In the Speech from the Throne delivered in the fall of 2007, the Harper government identified five priorities:

- Making Canada stronger both at home (particularly in the Arctic) and abroad (specifically in Afghanistan)
- Making the Canadian federation stronger by supporting the provinces
- Providing economic leadership in the form of responsible spending and tax relief
- Fighting crime
- Improving the environment

### **Your Task**

Write your own Speech from the Throne and present it to your class.

Note: You can use the themes listed above or you can create other themes if you like. For example, in the aftermath of the reading of the Throne Speech, Liberals vowed to come up with a plan to fight poverty. You may wish to review the fall 2007 Speech from the Throne at [www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp](http://www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/index.asp).

### **Preparation**

- Form a group of four or five.
- Review the information found in this *News in Review* video and Resource Guide.
- Brainstorm ideas related to your themes. Each group member can take responsibility for a theme.
- Come up with a rough draft of an action plan of proposals dealing with your themes.

### **Write and Present Your Speech**

- Each group member will take the information gathered during the research phase and write the section regarding their theme for the group's Speech from the Throne. (Length: 100-200 words per section)
- Read your speech to the class.
- Conduct a mock news conference where you answer questions from your classmates defending your speech.

### **Extension**

You may wish to send a copy of your Speech from the Throne to either a local newspaper or perhaps the Prime Minister's office itself.

You can send your comments by e-mail to [pm@pm.gc.ca](mailto:pm@pm.gc.ca) or write or fax the Prime Minister's office at:

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80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, ON  
K1A 0A2  
Fax: 613-941-6900