

## Review: Reality Check on whether opposition parties were forcing the election

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### REVIEW

On March 25, 2011, CBC Television's *The National* carried extensive coverage of the non-confidence vote in the House of Commons that dissolved Parliament and prompted the call for a general election.

Part of that coverage included a fact-checking feature, *Reality Check*, with CBC senior investigative correspondent Diana Swain appearing on-camera with host Peter Mansbridge to discuss whether opposition parties were forcing the election.

Swain asserted on the program that a government's fall did not necessarily mean an election must be called. She identified examples in Canadian history in which prime ministers unsuccessfully asked the governor general to dissolve Parliament.

She went on to more contemporary examples of political "strange bedfellows," including a 2008 arrangement among opposition parties, and described it as so: "In 2008, then-opposition leader Stéphane Dion made a handshake deal with the other opposition parties to offer themselves to the governor general as an alternative government."

An [online companion piece](#) to her television report was posted.

The complainant, Michael Akerly, said Swain claimed it was a handshake deal. "It was not — it was a signed agreement."

The executive editor of CBC News, Esther Enkin, wrote Akerly on April 26, 2011, to note that the Liberals and NDP signed an agreement December 1, 2008, on what Dion called a "collaboration" that would be supported in Parliament by the Bloc Québécois on confidence motions for 18 months.

"The six-point agreement specified, among other things, the number of cabinet portfolios assigned to each party. The Bloc did not sign the agreement and had no cabinet portfolios," Enkin wrote.

She further wrote that the three opposition parties also signed a separate agreement on policy to deal with the economy. "You may recall video of the three signing the agreement and shaking hands (sometimes mistakenly said to show the three agreeing to form a coalition)," Enkin wrote.

It was deemed necessary to produce a document on this matter to be able to convince the governor general that the Liberal-NDP coalition would enjoy the support of a majority of MPs in the Commons.

Enkin said that agreement was what Swain referred to as the “handshake” deal, not the signed policy accord. She did acknowledge that Swain “might have been clearer” in the report, but that it was not inaccurate. CBC had “amply explained and discussed” the arrangements among the parties on its programs, she said.

Akerly wrote back later that day to say the description of the arrangement was “so far wide of the mark as to be deliberately (not carelessly) misleading.” He said the report belittled the Conservative Party position on the matter and that a pattern of coverage existed that was tough on Conservatives and the NDP but not on others.

[CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices](#) identify accuracy as an essential principle in its work. “We seek out the truth in all matters of public interest. We invest our time and our skills to learn, understand and clearly explain the facts to our audience. The production techniques we use serve to present the content in a clear and accessible manner.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The federal government’s fiscal update November 27, 2008, included several measures other parties in the Commons opposed. They also asserted the government was not addressing the country’s challenging economic conditions.

It was reported extensively that the NDP leader, Jack Layton, asked his predecessor, Ed Broadbent, to contact former Liberal prime minister Jean Chretien about the current Liberal leadership agreeing to form a Liberal-NDP coalition to oust the Conservatives.

The proposed agreement would endure to June 2011, with outgoing Liberal Leader Stephane Dion as prime minister likely until a party convention in 2009, and 17 other Liberal and six NDP MPs in cabinet. The Bloc Quebecois agreed to support the coalition by not voting against a confidence motion until at least June 2010; their support was formalized in a three-party agreement on addressing economic issues. Their assumption was that the governor general, Michaëlle Jean, would recognize their majority support in the House and permit the Liberal-NDP coalition to form a government.

The federal government responded November 29, 2008, by calling the moves undemocratic, by dropping two contentious measures from its fiscal plans, and by advancing the date of a proposed budget to deal with the economic conditions to January from later that year. Those measures did not satisfy the coalition.

The government cancelled an opposition day in the House to avert a non-confidence vote. The prime minister and the governor general met December 4, 2008, to determine whether to dissolve or prorogue Parliament or ask the prime minister to resign and permit the opposition parties to form the government.

She opted for prorogation. In the aftermath, the coalition collapsed and the Liberals agreed to regular accountability statements on the economy in exchange for its support of a Conservative budget when Parliament resumed.

Swain's report of the "handshake deal" by opposition parties to offer themselves to the governor general as an alternative government did not ideally describe the situation. There was a public handshake by the Liberal, NDP and Bloc leaders, but it did not suggest a three-party coalition. Rather, it reflected a signed economic cooperation accord that was publicly celebrated with a ceremony to sign and shake hands. As noted, the coalition to form the government was a Liberal-NDP arrangement buttressed by the Bloc Quebecois' promise not to vote against the two-party coalition over the following 18 months.

I note that Swain did not present a fully produced news item but delivered her report in an exchange with host Peter Mansbridge on the program set. The report was interspersed with video clips of Harper, Dion and Layton. That relative informality of presentation will at times diminish the precision of language. More care could have been given either to identify the two discrete agreements or to characterize the economic accord as a signed deal supporting the two-party coalition.

But that precise ideal does not mean the description was enough to constitute a violation of CBC Journalistic Standards and Practices. There was simply room for improvement.

I also note that CBC elsewhere in many elements of programming described and discussed at length these details of the agreements.

Kirk LaPointe  
CBC Ombudsman