

Editorial ? If the rules permit it

We hate to sound cynical when it comes to a federal election.

No matter what we all might think of government or politicians, elections are important because they help establish how this country of ours is to be run, what kind of taxes we pay, what sort of economic rules are in place and how we will fulfill our obligations to the rest of the world. Elections are also the best chance for the governed, meaning us, to have some input.

But we also go along with what appears to be the prevailing mood out there, that Prime Minister Stephen Harper dropped the writ and dissolved Parliament prematurely. This means we will have to wait 11 weeks until we know the outcome, meaning 11 weeks without a government.

There have been several explanations offered as to why Harper did this.

The one most frequently mentioned is Harper's Conservatives have the most money socked away for an election campaign, so they will be able to handle the demands of a lengthy election period better than the other parties. Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson also observed that the parties have already been campaigning, since the Oct. 19 election date has been known for some time, and since Parliament has been in place, they have been able to do a lot of this at public expense. The point is valid, and that does raise the question as to whether fixing election dates was such a hot idea after all. We have never seen the need or the advantage of such provisions, but we'll repeat those arguments another time.

The fact is certain rules are in place, and it's up to the political parties to obey them. But if they can obey them and still find some benefit, then what's the problem?

While Parliament was in session, the parties had been trying to get their messages out to the voters. If the rules allow them to do such things on the public dime, then we have to expect them to do just that. And if dropping the writ early is permitted and gives the governing party an advantage, then we have to expect the prime minister to explore that advantage.

The coach of a hockey team does not bench the top scorer because of concerns that represents an unfair advantage. The smart coach takes full advantage.

But there is a caution that all the parties had better keep in mind. Just because the rules say something is okay does not mean the electorate are going to approve.

Former Ontario premier David Peterson learned that lesson the hard way when he called an election less than three years into his mandate, and found himself unemployed. He violated no rules when he did it. It's just the voters didn't approve.

As we stated above, there seems to be a bit of grumbling that the election call came so early. True, that grumbling could settle in the 11 weeks to come and all but disappear. Or it could get a lot louder.

It was Harper's call to make, and the consequences will be his to live with.