



Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper answers questions after delivering a speech announcing a new Polar class Arctic Icebreaker for the Canadian north to be named after former Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, August 28, 2008. REUTERS/Todd Korol

Reuters

Canada fall election more likely, government says

August 30, 2008

By Randall Palmer

OTTAWA (Reuters) - Canada's minority Conservative government will more likely call an autumn election, after meetings with opposition leaders failed to find common ground on Saturday, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's spokesman said.

"It's looking more likely than it was before these meetings," the prime minister's spokesman, Kory Teneycke, told reporters outside Harper's residence after the second of two meetings with opposition leaders.

Harper, elected with a minority of seats in Parliament in January 2006, had asked for the meetings to see

if any of the three opposition parties would agree to cooperate.

He has suggested that if not, he would have Parliament dissolved next week for an October 14 election.

Jack Layton, leader of the leftist New Democratic Party, said after meeting Harper that his party continued to have no confidence in the government.

He also gave a readout of the prime minister's view, saying of Harper: "He said that he doubted that there was any common ground."

The prime minister reached a similar conclusion after meeting Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe on Friday and does not expect any cooperation from Liberal leader Stephane Dion, head of Canada's largest political party, Teneycke said.

By some counts, Harper's is already the longest minority government in Canadian history. When Canadian minority governments are new, opposition parties typically are unwilling to bring them down as the people just spoke at the ballot box.

But Harper's team has concluded that now all three opposition parties would vote to topple him so there might as well be an election now to give a government, even if not his, a clear mandate to steer Canada through rough economic waters.

Some pundits also suggest he may want to go now before any worse news emerges, either economic or political.

MEDIOCRE POLLING

It is not that Harper has particularly good polling numbers. An Ipsos Reid poll issued on Saturday put the Conservatives only 2 points ahead of the Liberals -- 33 percent to 31 percent -- and a Nanos survey the day before had them 2 points behind.

"At least at the start, this is going to be a very, very tight election campaign," Ipsos Reid pollster Darrell Bricker told the National Post newspaper.

The Ipsos poll also showed 16 percent supporting the New Democrats and 10 percent for the Green Party.

The Greens are normally also-rans but got a big boost on Saturday when an independent member of Parliament joined the party, bolstering the party's bid to join election debates.

What to do about the environment will figure prominently in any campaign, with attention centered on Liberal leader Dion's proposal to introduce a carbon tax to fight climate change, offset with income tax cuts and help for the poor. The Green Party also advocates a carbon tax.

Harper says a new tax would put the economy into a tailspin and says Dion, who had kept him in power during a series of confidence votes this year, was obviously on a different path.

"It's become increasingly clear since Mr. Dion rolled out the main plank for his platform, a carbon tax, that his view is diametrically opposed to the that of the government on the key issues of the day," spokesman Teneycke said.

Dion is the only opposition leader who has refused an early meeting with the prime minister, holding out for September 9.

Teneycke said Harper's people have been trying for three weeks to set up a meeting or a phone call with Dion and assume "that he has no interest in having any cooperation."

The prime minister's office signaled on Friday that September 2-7 was the first -- and preferred -- window for an election campaign launch. That would put the likely actual vote on October 14, three weeks ahead of the U.S. election.

(Editing by Anthony Boadle)

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