



Lawmakers May Pass Harper Agenda and Avoid Election (Update1)

By Theophilos Argitis

Oct. 17 (Bloomberg) -- Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper probably will stay in power when lawmakers vote on his minority government's policy agenda next week, after the main opposition Liberal Party said it won't reject the plan.

Harper, 48, opened a new session of Parliament yesterday promising tax cuts and crime-fighting measures in the so-called Speech from the Throne.

The policy plan is considered a matter of confidence, so an election will be triggered if most opposition lawmakers reject it. The Bloc Quebecois and New Democratic Party said yesterday their members will vote against the plan. Liberal Leader Stephane Dion today said his party, the biggest opposition bloc in Parliament, will abstain from voting on the agenda if it isn't amended, thus allowing it to pass.

"` Canadians can count on the official opposition to do everything it can to make this Parliament work," Dion, 52, told lawmakers today. "` We will not make the government fall on its Throne Speech."

The government's strength in recent voter surveys may be behind Dion's unwillingness to rush to the campaign trail, analysts have said. The Conservatives have 40 percent support among

decided voters, according to an Ipsos Reid survey. That compares with 28 percent for the

Liberals -- their lowest support since the last federal election. The survey of 1,002 people was taken between Oct. 9 and Oct. 11 and has a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points.

Liberal Divisions

The Liberals have been slow to catch on with voters since Dion became leader in December, and this month internal bickering forced the party's national director and its top organizer in the French-speaking province of Quebec to quit.

"The Liberals' internal divisions continue to become public and they seem to be paralyzed by self-doubt and incriminations," said Geoff Norquay, a former spokesman for Harper. "It would be folly to force an election over the Throne Speech."

Also, the content of the speech isn't controversial, analysts said.

The platform Harper outlined yesterday included pledges to reduce the 6 percent national sales tax and offer other tax cuts for businesses and families. The sales-tax cut follows through on a 2005-06 campaign pledge to bring it to 5 percent from 7 percent. Harper also promised more help for workers in industries such as manufacturing and forestry that have been hurt by the dollar's surge to parity with its U.S. counterpart.

No 'Poison Pill'

Other pledges include steps to assert Canada's sovereignty in the Far North, such as mapping the country's Arctic seabed for the first time, along with a series of crime bills on everything from property crime to impaired driving.

"The Conservatives haven't included any type of poison pill in the Throne Speech," said Nikita Nanos, a pollster with SES Research in Ottawa.

The governing Conservatives hold 126 seats in the 308-seat House of Commons. The Bloc Quebecois and New Democratic Party have a combined 79 seats. The Liberals hold 96.

A final vote on the speech is scheduled to take place next Wednesday. Votes on amended versions of the plan are scheduled for tomorrow and next Monday.

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