



What comes next the key question as House resumes

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OTTAWA — They're ba-a-ack.

As federal politicians return to work Monday, Canadians have reason to fear another political horror show could be in the offing.

On the face of it at least, the setting is eerily similar to the pre-Christmas period when all hell broke loose.

The spectre of an opposition coalition attempting to wrest power still haunts Stephen Harper's minority government. And opposition sniping over the prime minister's response to the global economic crisis continues unabated.

But there are some crucial differences too which could preclude a repeat performance of the parliamentary chaos that nearly toppled Harper's Conservatives.

For one thing, there's been a major change in the cast of characters. The hapless Stephane Dion is no longer playing the lead Liberal role, replaced by his more accomplished understudy, Michael Ignatieff.

Polls suggest the leadership swap has already put the Liberals back in contention and softened public hostility towards the notion of a coalition.

Hence, Liberals doubt Harper will risk any measures in Tuesday's budget that could provoke the three opposition parties to defeat his government, forcing Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean to decide whether to call an election or give a Liberal-NDP coalition, backed by the Bloc Québécois, a chance to govern.

"One big difference is that he thought he could push our former leader around," says Liberal finance critic John McCallum.

"And I don't think he thinks he can push our new leader around."

The NDP and Bloc remain committed to the coalition and have signalled their intention to vote against the budget, no matter what's in it.

Ignatieff is considerably less enthusiastic about the coalition but he's continued to threaten the possibility, just in case Harper includes a "poison pill" in the budget, as he did in last fall's fiscal update.

The update included a measure aimed at financially crippling the opposition parties while doing little to stimulate the economy and clinging to the fiction that the nation's books could remain in the black. Enraged opposition parties quickly cobbled together the coalition agreement, forcing Harper to suspend Parliament to avoid certain defeat only two months after winning re-election with a strengthened minority.

While the Liberals used the hiatus to bolster their leadership, Harper's formerly unassailable grip on the Conservatives has been weakened by the update fiasco.

He faces no overt challenge to his leadership. But supporters of at least four potential successors - Quebec Premier Jean Charest, former New Brunswick premier Bernard Lord, Environment Minister Jim Prentice and Defence Minister Peter MacKay - have begun putting out feelers.

Should the government be defeated over the budget, many Tories privately predict Harper would be toast.

McCallum suspects Harper's survival instinct, if nothing else, will result in a budget that is "written in such a way as to get the maximum chance of passage, and in that case they would not have poison pills of one kind or another."

"The short answer is, I don't know what will be in the budget. But to the extent that his top priority is survival, then he'll try to make it a nice budget."

Harper may not have to try all that hard to make nice with Ignatieff. The newly minted Liberal leader's own survival instincts dictate that, barring some really egregious provocation, he'll allow the budget to pass.

Liberal insiders privately admit Ignatieff needs time to prove himself to Canadians and to rebuild and re-finance his cash-strapped party. Moreover, they see little advantage in having him wrest power from Harper at the start of what promises to be a deep and painful recession.

Pollster Nik Nanos sees in all this "an odd alignment of political interests" that suggest the budget will pass, the Harper government will carry on for some time and the tone in Parliament might actually be more temperate and reasoned.

"The prime minister needs to pass the budget in order to remain prime minister and to govern, and I think Michael Ignatieff needs the budget to pass in order to allow him to have breathing room to prepare the Liberal party for whenever the next election occurs," Nanos says.

"So we have kind of an odd mutual interest between two leaders who want the same job."

What's more, Nanos says neither leader can afford to antagonize Canadians who are increasingly consumed with worry about their jobs, their pensions and their kids' futures as the recession really begins to bite.

"Canadians are looking for a depoliticization of this particular budget process . . . This isn't really the time to play games."

And that, says Nanos, means Harper will have to be careful to avoid any overtly partisan ploy in the budget and Ignatieff will have to be equally careful to respond in a "very measured," thoughtful way.

"We might have kind of an odd situation where you have the leader of the Conservatives and the leader of the Liberals trying to . . . out-calm each other."