

Harper ready to snap

Quick election represents best chance to win

By GREG WESTON

As the passion of Barack Obama continues to stir America in his captivating presidential campaign of hope, a looming federal election will soon give Canadians a choice between Bully Boy and Mr. Bean.

Stephen Harper versus Stephane Dion -- the nasty prime minister many Canadians can't stand, against the nerdy Liberal leader most can't understand.

Little wonder a recent poll found a huge number of Canadians would gladly trade their ballots here for a chance to vote for Obama in the U.S. race.

After almost three years as prime minister, Harper has led his party through an historic stagnation of public opinion, despite a near-vacuum on the opposition benches.

The Conservatives would enter a campaign this week almost where they were in national popularity on the last election day.

While Canadians continue to cite Harper as the best leader of the bunch to be PM by a wide margin, that may not be saying much when even Jack Layton is seen as better prime ministerial stock than Dion.

No matter. Sometime this week, the prime minister will likely trigger an election he all but promised not to call before Oct. 19, 2009, the fixed election date legislated by his own Conservative government.

Harper has to know he is going to take a political hit for shrugging off fixed-election dates enshrined in law by his own government.

So, what's the rush?

It certainly has nothing to do with Parliament's having become "dysfunctional," as Harper claims.

Almost everything the Conservatives wanted to get through this Parliament has been passed with the help of the opposition parties, especially the Liberals who capitulated on all matters threatening an election they couldn't win.

If there is any legislative obstructionism, it is by Harper's crew preventing a handful of Commons committees from probing issues potentially damaging to the Conservatives.

POLLING DATA

Nor is there anything apparent in the national polling data that cries out for a snap election.

On the contrary, the latest Nanos Research polls for Sun Media show support for the Conservatives locked in a virtual tie with the opposition Liberals.

If an election were held today, the new Parliament would look pretty much like the old one.

Except for Quebec.

The latest CROP polls targeting that province show the Conservatives better poised than ever to pick up new seats there, mainly at the expense of the separatist Bloc Quebecois.

Winning those Quebec ridings is crucial to Harper's quest for a national majority, and Conservative strategists are keen to seize the apparent opportunity.

But what is driving Harper to the polls now is not so much the presence of winning conditions as it is fear of what's to come.

First and foremost, there are those dark economic clouds rolling in across the U.S. border.

The latest Nanos-Sun polls show public confidence among Canadians has already gone south.

Last week's surveys show consumers increasingly expect interest rates to rise, personal debt to increase, home values to drop, and a general weakening of economy.

While Harper is widely perceived as the best leader for tough times, the PM is also smart enough to know Canadians could have a change of heart if the economy actually goes into the tank.

PRE-EMPT

More immediately, a federal election called before Sept. 8 would pre-empt the five by-elections scheduled for next month, saving all the effort and expense of sending those voters to the polls twice.

Conservative strategists also know they either have to pull the plug quickly or wait until late November to avoid competing with the U.S. presidential election.

Then there is the Barack Obama factor: The choice of an anti-war, pro-labour leftie as the next U.S. president could well hurt hard-right Harper's electoral chances here.

In legislative terms, the PM might as well call an election.

The Conservatives don't appear to have anything much on their legislative agenda, and the three opposition parties have been preparing for an autumn mudfest in the Commons and parliamentary committees.

None will be sorely missed.

Finally, the Conservative warlords are looking across the moat at a Liberal party short of money and candidates, and a Grit leader armed with a flawed \$15-billion carbon tax that is impossible to explain in a two-day seminar.

Harper's choice is clear: Go while the going is good, or honour fixed election dates.

Mr. Bean! Mr. Bean!