



## Liberal insecurity

If Afghan detainee talks fail, Grits have most to lose

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Last Updated: May 12, 2010 10:00pm

While the opposition parties are publicly threatening to topple Stephen Harper's government over its refusal to release controversial Afghan detainee documents, the Liberals are quietly looking for a way to beat a graceful retreat specifically to avoid an election.

Whatever the respective parties hope to gain from resolving the document dispute, the Liberals have the most to lose if negotiations fail.

Commons speaker Peter Milliken has given the four political parties until Friday to come up with a mechanism that would allow opposition MPs to review classified government documents on the Afghan war without compromising national security.

If there is no deal, the Conservatives might well be found in contempt of Parliament, and Canadians could theoretically be dragged off to the polls by summer.

All things considered, a snap election might suit the PM just fine, and even work to the relative advantage of the New Democrats and Bloc Quebecois.

Michael Ignatieff and the Liberals, not so much.

A recent national poll by Leger Marketing shows the popularity of the respective parties almost exactly back to where they were on election day in 2008.

In other words, if an election were held tomorrow, chances are Canadians would get pretty much the same Parliament as today.

That certainly doesn't say much for Ignatieff's political achievements to date, remembering that the 2008 electoral disaster was the handiwork of Stephane Dion, arguably the worst ever Liberal leader.

Nanos Research, which regularly tracks public perceptions of the various political leaders, recently found Ignatieff trailing both the PM and even Jack Layton on issues of trust and vision for Canada.

Only 15% gave Iggy high marks for competence, far behind Harper.

When Nanos asked Canadians which party leader would make the best prime minister, Ignatieff wound up in a virtual tie with Layton at about 17%.

Not that Harper's leadership is exactly inspiring the nation.

Nanos reported that only 29% of those surveyed this month thought Harper would make the best PM.

Almost as many — 26% — were either unsure or said none of the above.

All of which points to a Canadian electorate in despair.

In fact, pollster Nik Nanos says the results of his firm's latest survey on trust, vision and competence show a level of voter disgust not seen since the sponsorship scandal.

If voters are fed up with all parties this time, it's little wonder.

Just look at the headline news in recent months — the seedy Guergis-Jaffer mess; the PM's centrepiece plan to promote Third World maternal health that morphed into a highly divisive fight over abortion; the ugly power struggle between Parliament and the Harperites over the Afghan documents.

Little wonder the Leger survey found only a third of those polled thought the country was heading in the right direction, and over half were dissatisfied with the current government.

What does it all mean?

As Nanos points out, a dispirited electorate tends to stay home in droves, a phenomenon that severely hurt the Liberals in the last election.

Add to that a widely perceived weak Liberal leader untested in an election campaign against the experienced Harper and a well-funded Conservative machine, and, well, you get the picture.

Unless fall semester at Harvard beckons, Iggy and the Grits will be in full electoral avoidance for some time to come.

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