

EI will be Liberal priority, Ignatieff says

Proposals could call for further stimulus coinciding with confidence vote

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OTTAWA — Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff said Parliament must improve the employment insurance program within the next "six to eight" weeks and vowed his party will make that element of Canada's social safety net a priority when Members of Parliament return to Ottawa today.

Mr. Ignatieff's criticism of the existing employment insurance system follows similar proposals by the New Democrats and comes as a new poll puts the Liberals in first place among national parties as NDP voters jump to the Liberals.

"People are shedding jobs like crazy," Mr. Ignatieff said on CTV's *Question Period*. "We've got to have a government that steps in and says 'Let's put some floor under this. Let's give people an employment insurance system that allows them to get training for new jobs.'"

Mr. Ignatieff indicated his party would make proposals that could be viewed as a second round of fiscal stimulus. His timeline for Parliament to act coincides with a Liberal-created confidence vote on the Conservative government's performance that will likely be held in June.



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Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff thanks party members after speaking in Laval, Que., on Sunday. (*Peter McCabe/The Canadian Press*)

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In addition to economic issues, gun control suddenly reappeared on the political agenda as MPs return for a brief two-week session. Prime Minister Stephen Harper urged a fishing and hunting group over the weekend to lobby opposition MPs to end the long gun firearms registry through a free vote in Parliament, where MPs vote according to their conscience rather than party position.

A private member's bill sponsored by Conservative backbencher Garry Breitkreuz would dismantle the registry, which has irritated many farmers, hunters and target shooters. However, the Prime Minister's Office said yesterday Mr. Harper's comments were not tied to the bill, and the government won't support the legislation as it is currently written because it would also change the rules for hand guns.

Mr. Ignatieff did not say how the employment insurance program should be changed. The Liberal and the Bloc Québécois supported an NDP motion that was approved by the House of Commons this month calling for an end to the two-week EI waiting period, as well as more generous benefits that are easier to obtain.

NDP Leader Jack Layton said on *Question Period* yesterday that it was the Liberal government that clawed back EI benefits in an effort to cut costs during the mid-1990s.

"Even during good times, the Liberals wouldn't come back and support strengthening the EI system," Mr. Layton said.

A spokesman for the Prime Minister, Dimitri Soudas, said the recent budget included "substantial" improvements to EI, including a five-week extension to the benefits period and retraining measures.

"If Mr. Ignatieff comes forward with proposals, this is going to be the first proposal he has made ever since he became Opposition Leader," he said.

A Nanos Research poll released this weekend said the Liberals had the support of 36 per cent of voters, ahead of the Tories at 33 per cent, the NDP at 13 per cent, the Bloc at 10 per cent and the Green Party at 8 per cent. The Liberals are up three points since the last poll a month ago, which the pollster attributes to "the steady decline in support for the NDP with those former NDP voters moving to the Liberals."

The current poll of 1,002 Canadians took place March 13 to 18 and is considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Both Mr. Ignatieff and Mr. Layton delivered speeches yesterday to party faithful in addition to their television appearances.

Mr. Ignatieff was in Laval, Que., addressing his party's Quebec wing, where he urged Bloc supporters to support the Liberals to ensure Quebeckers have a strong voice at the cabinet table in a future Liberal government. Meanwhile, Mr. Layton announced during a speech to the party's federal council that two task forces led by NDP MPs will tour the country looking for ideas to help the economy and to gather stories on how the recession is impacting the middle class.

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