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The Hill Times, February 16th, 2009
NEWS STORY
By Abbas Rana

It's a 'sombre' Parliament, as politicians react to global financial crisis

But PM Stephen Harper can't wait for Ignatieff Liberals to 'completely re-arm': Liberals

The minority Harper government won't be defeated likely until this fall, but all bets are off if Prime Minister Stephen Harper feels increasingly threatened by the Liberals and he could pre-empt political opponents by engineering his own defeat, say top political insiders in both political parties.

Liberal and Conservative insiders told *The Hill Times* the Liberals, now led by Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.), will likely be ready for an election this fall, but also said Liberals can't afford to prop up the Conservatives for as they did under former Liberal leader Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) who "exhausted" this political option.

"If he [Mr. Harper] thinks, they're [Liberals] getting ready faster than expected, he can't afford to let them completely re-arm," said one Liberal insider. "Dion took away the option of using that abstention on occasion. He used any currency that was there in that line of behaviour. He exhausted it."

Political observers say if Mr. Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) feels intimidated by any Liberal preparations, he is unlikely to sit on his hands and if Liberals support the Harper government for too long, they might lose the moral authority to criticize the government during the election campaign.

David Mitchell, president and CEO of the Public Policy Forum, said the new Liberal leader is now seen as a potential alternative prime minister and that if the political dynamics change in favour of the Liberals, they will be tempted to trigger an election.

"The dynamic between a Prime Minister and leader of the official opposition is usually one of the central dynamics, the most important relationships in determining whether a Parliament can work or not. The indications early on are that Mr. Harper and Mr. Ignatieff have a mutual respect that's at least as strong as their mutual antipathy and, therefore, that leads me to believe that this Parliament can, at least in the short term, function quite well but there's no guarantee that this will be sustained for very long because the environment is changing so quickly," said Mr. Mitchell.

"The external environment with the economy and the recession getting deeper and deeper. The external environment also in terms of what's going on, not only in Canada but globally and also the environment within Parliament. As the leader of the opposition gains more confidence, the temptation to face another election might be stronger than it is right now."

However, some insiders said that if Liberals started to make serious inroads in Quebec, the Bloc Québécois may decide to support the government or may come up with ways to prevent the defeat of the Harper government.

Liberal Whip Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton-Canso, N.S.) declined to offer any details on the Liberal Party's strategy.

"So far, we've been working cooperatively, where possible, through the House leaders. I would glean my initial impression from the working relationships with the whips and the House leaders and that's been very positive. I would hope that it



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would continue. Obviously, there are moments that are contentious but there's been at least an indication that they're willing to work with the opposition parties early on," said Mr. Cuzner, adding that the House officers from all political parties have been working cooperatively and that the opposition parties can see the government wants to work with them.

Ned Franks, a leading Parliamentary expert, said there is a natural rivalry between the four national political parties and said it's different from the poisonous atmosphere prior to the last federal election.

"At this point, the NDP sees the Liberals as their great enemy. The Harper government sees all other parties as their enemies. Bloc is sort of chortling with glee and the Harper government is chastened and, at this point, what they are doing is so in conflict with their basic philosophy of governance that they're having a hard time sorting out what it is that they're doing."

Mr. Mitchell said the mood of the House is "sombre" compared to the last Parliament.

"The mood is more sombre than it was prior to the last election especially because of the changed role of the leader of the opposition," said Mr. Mitchell. "The single factor that has altered the mood of Parliament and made it somewhat more constructive is the emergence of a new opposition leader who is considered to be a potential alternative Prime Minister in a way that none of the opposition leaders previously was considered. So that has created a different dynamic and a different mood in the House."

Conservative MP Ted Menzies (Macleod, Alta.) said the current Parliament is functioning well and pointed out the Liberals' support on the budget vote as an example.

"I've seen something that Canadians need to be able to see and deserve to see that, even though there can be debates about whether or not it's exactly the right policy, this Parliament has come together, at least the two major parties have come together and shown that this is the best policy for today for the situation we're in," said Mr. Menzies.

Mr. Menzies disagreed that the Prime Minister will pull the plug if he felt threatened by the Liberals. He said that it will be a mistake for any party to trigger an election in the near future because Canadians want to see all parties working together to fix the economy.

"Most Parliamentarians, that being the majority in the House of Commons, recognize that the most important thing facing Canadians is not a partisan battle, it's not another election, it's how do we maintain, how do we provide new jobs for Canadians. That's the most important thing and shame on us as politicians if we don't recognize that," said Mr. Menzies.

According to a Nanos Research poll released on Feb. 12, Conservatives and Liberals are in a statistical dead heat in popular support with 34 and 33 per cent, respectively. NDP support is at 16 per cent followed by the Bloc at 10 per cent and the Green Party support at 10 per cent.

In Quebec where Conservatives have lost significant ground recently, Bloc is still leading the pack with 38 per cent support followed by the Liberal Party at 28 per cent. Conservatives are at 16 per cent, NDP at 14 and the Green Party has a support of five per cent of Quebecers.

In the vote rich province of Ontario, Liberals are leading with 43 per cent support followed by the Conservatives at 34 per cent, NDP at 15 per cent and the Green Party at nine per cent.

This poll of 1,000 Canadians was conducted between Jan. 30 and Feb. 3 and has a margin of error of 3.1 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

Since Parliament resumed on Jan. 26, the overwhelming focus of has been to get the budget passed. The Conservatives and Liberals passed the budget at second reading on Feb. 10 and it's now before the House Finance Committee.

Insiders say there's some concern the NDP and the Bloc could stack the committee's witness list in order to delay the bill's passage. If the witness list gets bogged down, however, the committee will have to vote on it, in which the Liberals and the Conservatives would vote together.

Brad Lavigne, the NDP's director of communications, told *The Hill Times* last week that his party will do its best to ensure the budget receives proper scrutiny.

"So far, budget 2009 has had a speedy passage through the opening stages, but the New Democrats will be doing its job, its due diligence, as the effective opposition by ensuring that questions get asked, but we will be constructive as an effective

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opposition should do," said Mr. Lavigne.

Meanwhile, because Parliament was prorogued and the supplementary estimates were not passed in December, the House also dealt with the \$2.39-billion supplementary estimates 'B' in the "Committee of the Whole" last week. As well, Treasury Board President Vic Toews (Provencher, Man.) tabled \$3.9-billion for supplementary estimates 'C,' which will be studied at committees.

Over in the Upper Chamber, Senators have been debating the Throne Speech and the budget document. The budget document says "measures to support the economy must begin within the next 120 days to be most effective." If Bill C-10, the budget bill, is passed in the House, it would have to go to the Senate and receive Royal Assent by the end of May to be "most effective."

In his speech last week in reply to the Throne Speech, Liberal Senate Leader James Cowan said, "We intend to carefully scrutinize the government's legislative program and will propose legislative measures of our own. Where we find fault with legislation, we will propose amendments to improve it. If on the other hand, we find favour with the government's proposals, we will support them."—*With files from Bea Vongdouangchanh*

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The Hill Times