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Grit dissent could be a 'killer' for party in next election, says a top pollster

By TIM NAUMETZ

Liberal division over Michael Ignatieff's leadership will be a "killer" for the party if the dissent continues through into a federal election, says pollster Nik Nanos.

And a fall vote remains likely despite the damaging revelations Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) has faced over his government's spending spree for the world summits he is scheduled to host later this month in Toronto and Huntsville, Ont., Mr. Nanos added.

The Liberal strife, exposed and stirred up further by wild-card backroomer Warren Kinsella's declaration last week, backed up by his own sworn affidavit, of top-level merger talks with the NDP, denied by Mr. Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.), added to party woes created by the bleeding of Liberal support to the NDP. That phenomenon in itself has increased the chances that Mr. Harper might form the majority government that slipped through his grasp in the past two elections.

"I'll tell you what helps the Conservatives is, if the Liberals are perceived as being divided or not supporting of their leader," Mr. Nanos told *The Hill Times*. "When you get into a writ, that's what I'll call a killer issue. I don't think there's been any leader that's survived a federal election wherever there's been speculation on whether he or she is the right person for the job, or whether they've been grumbling within the party."

As the Liberals enter the Parliamentary summer recess in turmoil, Conservative organizers have their campaign machine at the same position it has been in since the last election—idling at the start line, its engine purring but ready to roar at an instant's notice under three-month cycles of ramping up for elections, then back down again, that they have maintained since 2006.

The organizers believe just under 40 per cent of the popular vote—"we'd have to be brushing 40," one of them said—would be enough to give them the 16 seats they need to form a working majority. The Conservatives, who dropped slightly but still registered at 35.6 per cent of decided voters in the last Nanos poll, compared to 29.2 per cent for the Liberals, look back longingly at the 38.4 per cent that gave former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien a majority in 1997. But the Liberals, exploiting a split in the conservative movement then, captured 101 of Ontario's 103 Commons seats, and it is unlikely Mr. Harper will replicate that triumph.

Conservative prospects over a Liberal-NDP vote split that could benefit the Conservatives even in Ontario, however, look better as the Liberals also continue to search fruitlessly for a formula that would help Mr. Ignatieff strike a chord with voters.



Even two of his MPs laughed at jokes about the image of a bus tour Mr. Ignatieff's aides plan for him through the summer—visiting "every single" province and territory—as Liberal strategists attempt to reacquaint Mr. Ignatieff with Canada after the 27 years he spent in prestigious academic and media positions abroad. One of the MPs suggested Mr. Ignatieff told his caucus he wanted to speak to and meet "the Canadians" during his summer travels.

Mr. Nanos said the trouble the party faces as it heads into an election divided over leadership has been made worse by the way the top echelon of the Liberal Party appointed Mr. Ignatieff last year following the party's disastrous attempt to form a coalition with the NDP, supported by the Bloc Québécois, so soon after the 2008 election.

"He hasn't been elected by the Liberal Party and it's going to be of even greater political significance that he show [that] the party is united behind him," said Mr. Nanos. "If the Liberal numbers were good [now], it might have looked like a good political move."

He noted the Conservatives have experienced severe turbulence over the past few months in controversies over \$1-billion in spending for the G8 and G20 summits, the lobbying affair involving former Conservative MP Rahim Jaffer and his wife, former Conservative MP Helena Guergis, and allegations of detainee torture in Afghanistan.

"Even with all those political softballs, the Liberals haven't been able to really get the upper hand in any kind of significant way," said Mr. Nanos.

There was concern in the Parliamentary Press Gallery last week that the sudden appointment of Kory Teneycke, Mr. Harper's former communications director, to oversee journalists at the Quebecor Media Inc. Parliament Hill bureau, may have been related to controversial stories about the summit spending. Several of the most controversial reports were broken by a member of the bureau, Sun Media columnist Greg Weston.

It appears something happened. One source said Mr. Weston's column "is gone," and there were possible talks about a position in Washington, D.C.

The last voter-intent poll by Mr. Nanos, completed June 3, suggested that four percentage points lost by the Liberals went to the NDP, as its support rose by 4.5 per cent. But a poll by Frank Graves and his Ekos firm completed June 8 showed support for the Conservatives at 31.4 per cent—with voters "gently recoiling" as Mr. Graves described it—and the NDP only at 16.6 per cent. The Liberals received 26.8 per cent support in the Ekos survey.

The difference between the two polls, as far as NDP support goes, is crucial.

Mr. Nanos said the gap between the NDP result his poll discovered and the support Mr. Graves found for the NDP is explained by the fact that Ekos lists the parties, including the Green Party. Green got 5.1 per cent support in the Nanos poll, comparable to its share in the 2008 election, but 12.6 per cent in the Ekos survey.

The Nanos poll asks voters their preferences by party, but does not list the parties. "You actually have to say Green for it to be registered," Mr. Nanos said. "If you're doing a survey and you're prompted with Green as an option, and you might not be happy with a lot of the mainstream parties, it's a bit of a parking space."

"The key thing to watch is actually the split between the Liberals and the NDP, that's actually what's probably going to determine the next election," he added.

Liberals disagree with the point, despite the fact they benefitted from a reverse trend in the 2004 election, when many NDP voters who wanted to keep Mr. Harper out of power switched to the Liberals as the campaign wound down and salvaged a minority for then prime minister Paul Martin.

"My feeling is that the NDP have held around 16 per cent, always have, when it comes to an election," says Toronto Liberal MP Alan Tonks (York South-Weston, Ont.). "There's a window at this time, but when it comes to an actual election call and the issues are out, I don't think that [traditional] percentage is going to change."