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Tories in control of own destiny, Liberals need scandal to trigger election: Nanos

Libs need a 'political smash and grab' to boost numbers and pull election trigger, says pollster Nik Nanos.

By TIM NAUMETZ
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Former Liberal MP Jean Lapierre says his onetime colleagues in the House of Commons were seized with a "malaise" as they meekly acknowledged they could not force an election over the budget and—despite two months of protest over Parliament's winter suspension—could not even utter the word "election."



Two Liberal MPs reflected the mood of caucus as they privately told *The Hill Times* an election is unlikely even before next year unless there is a dramatic shift in the polls and party leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke Lakeshore, Ont.) miraculously catches on with the public.

"The leader's numbers are not good," said one of the MPs. The other replied "it's fine with me" when a reporter suggested it might even be two years before an election.



Mr. Lapierre, who watched Question Period in the guest row of seats reserved for temporary passes to the Parliamentary Press Gallery, agreed later the Liberal benches appeared listless after their relentless attacks through January and February against Prime Minister Stephen Harper's (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) decision to prorogue Parliament in December.

The Commons scene was like the calm after the storm.

"When you go around here, and there's no buzz and nobody wants to pronounce the word

election, it shows that there is a malaise, obviously," said Mr. Lapierre, a former Liberal campaign strategist in Quebec who maintains party connections he draws on for political commentary on TVA.



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One of Ottawa's top pollsters, Nik Nanos, meanwhile, told *The Hill Times* that the only thing that could help the Liberals at this point would be a "massive mistake" by the government that would allow the official opposition party to pull off "a political smash and grab."

Mr. Nanos said the stalemate—with Prime Minister Harper also in no position to pull the plug because of the government's own low numbers and public apprehension—must be depressing for the restive Liberal party.

"You can imagine what type of psychological impact it has if you're the opposition party, the leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, knowing that there's a government that's going to survive for at least another six months because the political opportunity doesn't really exist to trigger an election," Mr. Nanos told *The Hill Times*.

"The only thing that could really potentially trigger an election is some kind of scandal or major mistake," he added. "The Liberals basically need the Conservatives to make some kind of massive mistake to create the atmosphere that maybe there would be, what I will say, a political smash and grab."

The Conservatives are "in control of their destiny" over the next year, Mr. Nanos said, adding that Mr. Harper has likely learned a lesson from his unpopular decision to suspend Parliament for strategic reasons.

"The one lesson in the last 60 days that the Conservatives have learned is that even when you're sitting on a 10-point lead, it can change very quickly just from one political move," he said. "I expect that the Conservatives will be more circumspect."

He said the only issue now on the horizon with the potential for major damage to the government—the treatment of Afghan detainees transferred by Canadian troops in Kandahar—has not yet attained proportions that could change the balance.

"There's just not a lot there," Mr. Nanos said. "It would need some kind of new twist in the story to have some kind of legs."

Mr. Lapierre and Mr. Nanos both said the Liberals know they can do nothing as long as they hover at or below 30 per cent in opinion polls—despite Prime Minister Harper's blunder over prorogation—and so long as Mr. Ignatieff's personal ratings remain well below Prime Minister Harper's.

"All that discussion about policy, it's all very nice, it helps the internal dynamic, but frankly the first question people ask themselves about the leader is 'Do I like this guy, do I trust this guy?'" said Mr. Lapierre. "Nobody has any doubt of the fact that Michael Ignatieff is intelligent, this is not the question mark. It's nice to do policy, but it won't solve much. If you don't trust the salesman, then the product is less important."

Mr. Lapierre was referring to reams of information the Liberals gathered about a host of social, economic, legal, environmental and political topics during the month of roundtable conferences they held in the Centre Block's venerable Railway Committee Room and the ornate Reading Room committee chamber during the eight-week prorogation.

On Mr. Ignatieff's personal public opinion ratings, Mr. Lapierre was referring to the kind of survey Mr. Nanos published in mid-February. It showed Prime Minister Harper, even though his popularity had dropped four percentage points during the prorogation, maintained a rating of 25 per cent as most trustworthy leader. That was nothing to brag about, but Mr. Ignatieff's rating was only 10.4 per cent on the same question, inexplicably down as well by half a percentage point.

An Ekos poll published on budget day showed the Conservatives maintaining a three-percentage point lead over the Liberals, with 32.4 per cent voter support. The Liberals were down to 29.4 per cent.

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