

NEWS

If House falls on Throne Speech, 'so be it': Goodale

By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH

As the opposition parties prepare for a fall confidence vote on the Conservative Throne Speech, Liberal House Leader Ralph Goodale says that the Liberals will vote according to "what is good for the country" and if that, "on the arithmetic in Parliament, turns out to defeat the government and cause an election, then so be it."

After Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) prorogued the first session of the 39th Parliament last week, parties came out with issues that would cement their support for the Throne Speech on Oct. 16, which is a confidence measure. Items such as Canada's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the environment, the economy and addressing social issues are on the parties' wish lists.

Mr. Goodale (Wascana, Sask.) said his party is firm on what it believes should go into the Throne Speech and is not afraid to pull the plug on Parliament and go to an election. "Obviously one cannot be totally definitive until you actually see what's there, but given what the government did in the first part of the session, and given the continuing belligerent attitude throughout the summer, and as we head toward the fall session, it's hard to believe that this government could produce a Throne Speech that would in fact turn out to be satisfactory," Mr. Goodale told *The Hill Times*.

"We'll wait and see but obviously we're highly skeptical about the principles and the values that lie behind this government because their behaviour would indicate their principles and their values are way out of whack with what the mainstream of

Canadians would want and would believe in. So we will vote on the Throne Speech according to our own conscientious judgment about what is good for the country and if that, on the arithmetic in Parliament, turns out to defeat the government and cause an election, then so be it, we will perform our Parliamentary function in a responsible way."

NDP House Leader Libby Davies (Vancouver East, B.C.) said her party will have to wait to see what is in the Throne Speech to determine if NDP MPs will support it. "It would be ridiculous to say, 'Well, we're going to support the government' or 'We're not going to support the government.' We have to see what that Speech from the Throne says," she said, adding that the NDP also has some priorities they want to see and that if they don't see them, they will also not hesitate to vote against the government.

"I think if people look at the record, they will see there's no escaping the fact that on the four occasions that we've had a confidence vote, the NDP was the only party to vote against the government on all four occasions," she said. "The NDP is very prepared [for an election]. We're in very good shape. Our leader is doing very well. I think that Jack Layton is just holding a really steady momentum. He's very well respected, so we're ready whenever that will be."

Despite the threats, however, the Conservatives say they are prepared for any outcome following a vote on the Throne Speech. "We could be defeated any week the House is sitting, on an opposition day, a non-confidence motion from the opposition, so we just have to be ready for an election at any time. That's always been our approach,"

Government House Leader Peter Van Loan (York-Simcoe, Ont.) told *The Hill Times*. "It's been our intention to govern through to Oct. 19, 2009, and this Throne Speech will reflect that longer term objective."

The Throne Speech debate takes place over six days, not necessarily consecutive, starting with the "Leaders Day" in which Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion (Saint Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) will make a speech and most likely put forward an amendment to the Throne Speech. Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe (Laurier Sainte Marie, Que.) will do the same and put forward a sub-amendment. The House will then vote on the sub-amendment and amendment, and on the sixth day of debate, MPs will vote on the Conservatives' second Throne Speech, either accepting or rejecting the government's plans and priorities. Should MPs choose to not support the government's Throne Speech, Parliament would dissolve, as it would be an indication of non-confidence in the government's agenda.

Currently, the Conservatives have 126 seats, the Liberals 96, the Bloc 48, the NDP 29. There are two independents and seven vacancies. The Conservatives would need the support of at least any one opposition party to survive a confidence measure.

SES Research pollster Nik Nanos said none of the opposition parties or the government has an upper hand when it comes to whether there should be an election. If the government tries to engineer its own defeat or if the opposition wants to trigger an election, it's difficult to say who will gain the most. "We're in such a volatile environment, it's hard to say who would benefit from an election at this point in time," Mr. Nanos said, adding that no matter what happens, the next government is most likely to be another minority.

"If there's any sense that the government or the Conservatives are vulnerable it just increases the likelihood of the government falling. You have to remember, if you look at past experience at the Trudeau Liberals, Pierre Trudeau was retired and ready to exit politics and the Conservatives kind of moved their agenda forward believing that there was no way the Liberals would cause an election, but the environment changed so quickly. The Liberals decided to take the chance and they unseated Joe Clark as a result. I don't think the Conservatives should be taking for granted that the opposition parties would not want an election just because they might not have as much money or because they might not be as organized because it's so volatile."

The opposition criticized the government last week for proroguing Parliament, saying the House should get back to work. Ms. Davies said the government's reason for proroguing was politically motivated. "There are important issues to deal with, so prorogation now means that bills like C-30 [the Clean Air Act] have died and we're all hanging about now while they write a new Speech from the Throne. I think everybody is very clear why this is being done. Clearly it has nothing to do with the public interest. It has everything to do with the Conservative political interest," she said.

Mr. Van Loan said however that it was "a logical time to prorogue" because the government has delivered on most of its promises since being elected in January 2006. "After 19 months of delivering those results, we have a country that's more united, a clean government, a stronger economy than we've seen in decades. It was a logical time to move into the next phase," he said. "When we did that first Throne Speech, most pundits were saying a long minority government in Canada is 18 months and this government will be lucky to last that long and obviously we have, and we've gotten what we wanted to get done so it's a logical time to lay out a detailed agenda for the next time running up until the election in Oct. 19, 2009."

While the Liberals and the Bloc say a clear exit from Afghanistan in February 2009 should be included in the Throne Speech and that a plan for the environment is also needed, Mr. Nanos said the Conservatives have to be defensive when it comes to these issues. "What they want to do is inoculate themselves from attack so that it becomes a non-issue," he said. "Think of it this way. All the parties are fighting to have an election on their terms, the issues that they're strong on. For the Conservatives, the ideal world for the Conservatives is probably an election on trust and fiscal management, tax dollars, cutting the GST because that's where they're strong. For the Liberals, it would probably be better for them to fight an election on more social issues and also federalism."

Mr. Nanos said if the opposition strategy to make Afghanistan the big issue on which an election is fought, the Conservatives could be in trouble. "Right now, the Conservatives have a big problem. It's called Afghanistan in Quebec. It would be hard for them even to hold onto a minority government if the Afghanistan issue kind of shapes the political landscape during an election," he said, adding that although the environment is a top-of-mind issue for Canadians, Afghanistan will be what people are for or against. "The environment is kind of one of those issues that although it doesn't drive voting behaviour you don't want to fail on the issue. I think what the opposition parties will try to do is kind of portray the government as inflexible and insensitive to environmental issues."

When asked if the government would address the Afghanistan exit in the Throne Speech, Mr. Van Loan said that the government was committed to putting international affairs questions to a vote in the House of Commons. "Our approach is very different from what the Liberals practiced in government instead of what they are actually preaching now, we engaged in that consultation that they never did," he said. "We've also made clear any major commitment beyond February 2009 will also require some degree of support from the other parties because it will require the support of the House of Commons and we're in a minority."

He did not say when that vote would take place, however, only saying, "The Prime Minister has indicated the desire to try to build some sort of consensus among the other parties, so I don't imagine we will have a vote on that kind of issue until the opportunity for that process has unfolded."

Mr. Nanos said Quebec is still "the key battleground" for the Conservatives to win a majority government. The Tories are currently in a statistical tie with the Liberals in Quebec, both in the low 20s, Mr. Nanos said. "You have to remember in the last election the Conservatives were in the high 20s in Quebec so they still have to pick up some ground. These byelections in Quebec are probably going to be another big factor as to whether we have another election. If the byelections are bad news for the Conservatives, specifically in Quebec, and the Throne Speech moves forward and there are things the opposition isn't happy with, then we're looking at an election. If the Conservatives can do well or reasonably well in Quebec, that doesn't mean they have to win seats, but they have to do well. Then that'll probably put a wet blanket on both the Bloc and the Liberals so watch the byelections in Quebec because they're going to be the best indicator of what's going on in Quebec and likely strategic implications for a federal election."

Nationally, the Conservatives are polling at 36 per cent, according to a poll by SES last month. The Liberals trail at 33 per cent, the NDP at 13 per cent, the Bloc at 10 per cent and the Green Party at eight per cent.

bvongdou@hilltimes.com
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