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Stalled Liberals ponder fall poll

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Mon, August 31, 2009

Politics

By ELIZABETH THOMPSON, SUN MEDIA NATIONAL BUREAU

OTTAWA -- In theory, it's a routine meeting to discuss topics ranging from the economy to the political agenda for the fall.

But when Liberals gather in Sudbury today for their annual summer caucus retreat, there will be very little routine about it.

Instead, one burning question will be on the minds of Liberal MPs and senators -- should their party try to trigger a federal election this fall?

Throughout the summer, the Liberals have continued to prepare for a possible election, choosing candidates, building their organization and working on policy. As they head into their caucus meeting, some are urging Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff to strike now and force a confidence vote when Parliament resumes sitting in late September. Others, like Senator David Smith, are urging caution.

Complicating things further is the fact that following an initial bounce after Ignatieff replaced Stéphane Dion as leader, the Liberals have stalled in public opinion polls.

Throughout the summer, most polls have shown the Liberals and the Conservatives in a statistical tie. Pollster Nik Nanos says the Liberals have gone as far as they can go by simply changing leaders.

"The Liberals have probably achieved everything that they can achieve without putting forth any kind of vision for the future," he said.

The Liberals also have



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yet to really show Canadians how Ignatieff would be different than Prime Minister Stephen Harper, he added.

Nanos said the Liberals also should be careful about the topic they pick to trigger an election. An election on the economy tends to give the Conservatives an advantage while an election on issues such as health care and national unity advantage the Liberals, he said.

A key factor in the next election will be whether the Liberals can convince nervous New Democrats to rally behind them to defeat Harper, Nanos said.

One place where that is going to be critical is northern Ontario, where the Liberals have chosen to hold their caucus meeting.

Once a Liberal bastion, Liberal caucus chairperson Anthony Rota holds the lone Liberal seat in the region, largely surrounded by NDP MPs.

As part of the caucus, Liberal MPs will be fanning out across Sudbury, visiting local groups, companies and institutions.

Rota said holding the caucus meeting in Sudbury gives Liberals a chance to learn more about the area and its issues. For example, the recession has hit the region hard, with unemployment nearly doubling since last year.

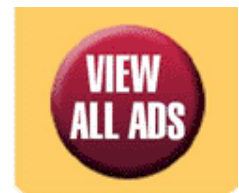
"It gives us a chance to highlight northern Ontario," Rota said

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