

June election over EI reform unlikely: pollster

David Ljunggren, Reuters

Presented by



Andy Clark/Reuters

While the Liberals are threatening to trigger a new election to protest against government handling of the economic crisis, there is no guarantee Canadians will be voting any time soon.

Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff, buoyed by recent polling numbers, demanded on Sunday that the minority Conservative government make unemployment payments more generous to help Canadians ride out the recession.

"If the government will work with me, then we'll get it done. If they won't. Then we'll have to have an election," he said after a party conference confirmed him as the new leader.

But analysts said Mr. Ignatieff's tough words were more of a warning to Prime Minister Stephen Harper than a genuine declaration that he is ready to bring down the Conservative government.

They pointed to a host of reasons why an election might not happen soon.

First, Liberal support, though higher, is still not strong enough to guarantee even a narrow victory. And to bring the Conservatives down the Liberals need the support of both the other opposition parties in the House of Commons, neither of which may be in the mood to co-operate.

Nik Nanos, head of the Nanos Research polling firm, said an election now -- Canada's fourth in five years -- would "really be a crap shoot for either one of the main parties".

Two polls over the weekend put public support for the Liberals at 36 percent compared with 33 percent for the Conservatives - a gap far too small to ensure even a narrow minority government.

"If anyone was looking at the polling numbers ... and the general political environment, the conclusion would be that this isn't a good time to have an election. There are too many risks for all the parties," Nanos told Reuters.

Mr. Ignatieff became Liberal leader last December, after the party was humiliated in the October election. One reason for the poor performance was that, under then leader Stephane Dion, the party had regularly backed Mr. Harper on confidence votes rather than risk going to the polls.

This consistent support allowed the opposition New Democrats and the Bloc Quebecois to portray

the Liberals as weak, further damaging the party's standing.

By making it clear he is no longer ready to automatically back the government, Mr. Ignatieff is forcing the other two parties to decide whether they want to keep Mr. Harper in power.

"They seem to be getting cozy with the Conservatives. I sometimes wonder whether there's a little coalition forming there. Mr. Harper is fighting for his political survival," Mr. Ignatieff told CTV television on Sunday.

Polls show popular support is slipping for both the New Democrats and the Bloc, which only fields candidates in French-speaking Quebec.

Richard Schultz, a professor of politics at Montreal's McGill University, said this means a quick vote is unlikely.

"He (Mr. Ignatieff) has turned the tables on the New Democrats and the Bloc. They don't want an election, so they're going to be the ones forced to support the government in some way," he told Reuters.

Last week, Mr. Harper dismissed the idea of any deal with the Bloc, which wants independence for Quebec.

Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe dodged questions last week about a possible deal with the government, saying he wanted support for a new stimulus bill. The Bloc regularly backed Mr. Harper in key votes after the Conservatives won power in early 2006 on the grounds that their policies would help Quebec.

A spokesman for New Democrat leader Jack Layton -- whose relations with Mr. Ignatieff are poor -- brushed off talk of an election as speculation.

Policy questions and tactical stratagems aside, Mr. Ignatieff is also facing basic challenges of mathematics and dates.

The Conservatives have 143 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, which means Mr. Ignatieff would need the support of both the New Democrats and the Bloc to defeat the government. If either refuses to play ball, Mr. Harper is safe.

July elections are highly unusual in Canada. If a vote were to be held in late June, the government would have to be defeated by May 15 at the latest.

No confidence votes are scheduled before then, but Mr. Harper could put pressure on the opposition parties by offering them the chance to set the Parliamentary agenda next week. This would permit them to bring forward a confidence vote.

The Liberals are still short of money after three successive election defeats. They also do not have an

election platform and are scrambling to draw one up by June.

"They still have money problems, they haven't got a program yet -- it doesn't make any sense," said Mr. Schultz.

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