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Tories win if Grits, NDP merge ranks

It would be naive to think supporters of each party would flock to united front — they might just vote Conservative

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OTTAWA — All too often, the town that bluster built erupts in no end of controversy surrounding some alleged backroom political plot which is just too far-fetched or dumb to be believed.

Take the latest kerfuffle in the nation's capital over secret merger talks between the federal Liberals and New Democrats.

So far, it seems the would-be deal-making is so clandestine that nobody but two Liberal troublemakers knows anything about it.

Notably, Michael Ignatieff and Jack Layton, the two leaders who would be plotting to tie the knot, have both denied the rumours.

The beleaguered Liberal leader called the whole thing "ridiculous," and it certainly is that.

For one thing, there is the small matter that the Liberals would likely have nothing to gain from merging with the NDP.

It could even make things worse for Ignatieff and his party, if that's possible.

For example, consider the results in the last federal election in seat-rich Ontario.

The Conservatives won 51 of the 106 seats in the province with 39% of the vote.

The Liberals and NDP split the rest — the Grits winning 38 seats with 34% of the vote; the Dippers holding 17 seats with 18% of the ballots cast.

In their dreams, the Libs and NDP imagine a merger would simply combine their respective votes and total seats.

Reality is not even close.

In fact, pollster Nik Nanos says his research suggests a Liberal-NDP union could well hand Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservatives their elusive majority win at the polls.

"A merger creates a new beast that repels people from both sides," Nanos says.

In other words, a lot of Canadians who vote Liberal would never support a party that includes the NDP, and a lot of New Democrats feel the same way about the Grits.

Nanos Research routinely tracks voters' second choice of political parties, and the results suggest a merger would indeed be smart as a brick.

The latest Nanos poll, for instance, shows that far more Liberal voters would rather go to the Conservatives (38.7%) as their second choice, than to the New Democrats (27.9%).

In other words, put the Libs and Dippers together and watch all those blue Grits holding their noses for Harper in the next election.

Even among current NDP supporters, 22.6% of them say they would rather go to the Conservatives than throw their support to the Liberals.

Other recent polling on hypothetical mergers led by various likely suspects — Ignatieff, Layton, Bob Rae, for instance — suggest just about anyone but Iggy might be able to mount a competitive race against the Conservatives.

Or not.

Again, let's take the last election results from Ontario, and for the sake of argument, pretend that a merger wouldn't send droves of supporters from both parties running for the hills.

Our statistical analysis shows that if all the NDP and Liberal voters had instead cast their ballots for a merged-party candidate in every riding, the Conservatives still would have won over 80% of the seats they took in Ontario.

All of which makes the latest round of merger-mania controversy dangerous for the Liberals and their already beleaguered leader.

As one longtime Grit strategist puts it: "The last thing he needs is this stuff swirling around.

"Unless they can kill it dead, this is exactly what could give the Conservatives the ballot question they want."

That question, of course, would position a Conservative majority as the only way to prevent a possible merger or coalition of the Liberals and NDP.

Heck, the Conservatives already had that fear campaign in the can and ready to roll long before the latest merger nonsense.

It features video from one of the dumbest political photo-ops ever, shot shortly after the 2008 election.

There was then Liberal leader Stephane Dion inking the deal to form a power-sharing government with Layton, co-signed by Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe — the Three Stooges and their coalition of losers.

Notably, Canadian voters responded to that idea by dropping Liberal support to one of its lowest levels in modern polling.

The latest bout of Liberal silliness over a merger that will never happen has merely supplied the joyous Conservatives with fresh material for their next election attack ads.

Bring in the clowns.

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