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Canadian government safe, but election talk not far off

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By David Ljunggren - Analysis

OTTAWA (Reuters) - Although Canada's minority Conservative government looks to have avoided defeat over its budget, Prime Minister Stephen Harper will not be able to relax for too long before talk of an election starts to heat up again.

Michael Ignatieff, the new and assertive leader of the opposition Liberals, outlined a series of conditions on Wednesday for backing the budget, ensuring the document was likely to be adopted by Parliament.

The decision keeps the Conservatives in power for the time being, but whether the spirit of co-operation can last long is open to question. All three opposition parties say they cannot trust Harper and complain he has poisoned the political atmosphere in Parliament.

"The gap between promise and performance in this government has been so large that you could drive an 18-wheeler through it," senior Liberal legislator David McGuinty told reporters minutes after Ignatieff had spoken. "Mr Harper has to understand that he's on probation right now."

The Liberals' confident tone is remarkable, given that in last October's election, under previous leader Stephane Dion, the party put in one of its worst ever performances.

One of the many reasons for the poor showing was the fact that the Liberals -- short of money, dispirited and keen to avoid a new election while trailing in the polls -- often backed the Conservatives on key confidence votes, giving an impression of weakness.

Although Ignatieff has much less time for compromise, he, like Dion before him, is again backing the government. The leaders of both other opposition parties mocked his decision and predicted Ignatieff would continue to find reasons to support Harper.

"I think, realistically, the next window for an election is probably the fall," said pollster Nik Nanos of Nanos Research.

Harper said last week he wanted to work with the opposition for a couple of years to deal with the effects of the global economic crisis but insiders think an election could well come before then.

"I don't see why they'd try to bring us down until the next budget (likely in March 2010). I think we'll be all right until then," one well-placed Conservative told Reuters.

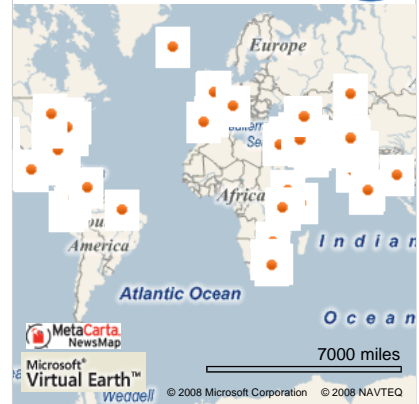

A federal vote next spring would be the third in just over four years.

COALITION IDEA UNPOPULAR

The Conservatives won the January 2006 election with a minority of seats in the House of Commons, then strengthened that minority in the October 14 vote last year.

But they quickly came under attack for a fiscal update that critics slammed for not addressing the economic downturn and for a series of political plans that a furious opposition said were purely partisan.

The three opposition parties agreed on Dec 1 to form a coalition and would have defeated the government had Harper not managed to have Parliament temporarily suspended in December.

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