

# Merger mania dangerous for Ignatieff's Liberals

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Often, the town bluster built erupts in controversy over an alleged backroom political plot too farfetched or dumb to be believed.

Take the latest kerfuffle over secret merger talks between the federal Liberals and New Democrats.

It seems the would-be deal-making is so clandestine 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 Liberal leader called the whole thing "ridiculous," and it certainly is.

The Liberals would likely have nothing to gain from merging with the NDP.

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

Consider results in the last federal election in seat-rich Ontario. The Conservatives won 51 of the 106 seats 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 combine their votes and seats.

Reality is not even close.

Pollster Nik Nanos says his research suggests a Liberal-NDP union could 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.

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 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 likely suspects -- Ignatieff, Layton, Bob Rae, for instance -- suggest just about anyone but Iggy might mount a competitive race against the Conservatives.

Or not.

Let's take the last election results from Ontario and pretend a merger wouldn't send droves of supporters from both parties running for the hills.

Our analysis shows 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 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 would position a Conservative majority as the only way to prevent a possible merger of the Liberals and NDP.

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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