



Tories' EI test may have enriching results

STEPHEN MAHER LETTER FROM OTTAWA
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Finance Minister Jim Flaherty leaves with his notes after hosting a pre-budget town hall meeting in his home riding of Whitby-Oshawa in Whitby, Ont., on Thursday. (NATHAN DENETTE / CP)



EVER SINCE Kory Teneycke took over as Stephen Harper's communications director in July, reporters have been summoned for occasional briefings with a senior Conservative official — a welcome thaw in this government's media strategy.

A couple of dozen reporters sit around a big table and pose questions to the official, on condition that we not disclose the name of the person doing the talking.

This week, CBC's Keith Boag asked the senior official whether the government would continue to force legislation through the House of Commons by making bills confidence matters.

While Stéphane Dion was the Liberal leader, the Tories used the threat of an election to force the Grits into humiliating abstentions 43 times.

But even before Michael Ignatieff became leader, he was saying the Liberals didn't want to keep abstaining.

"We are tired of sitting down," he said. "Is that clear?"

Mr. Harper has apparently decided not to continue to use confidence votes in this way, although his official pointed to the economy, not the changed political circumstances, as the reason.

"We're in a different situation, in a situation where we have a global economic crisis, where the expectation is that the government and the opposition parties will put their focus on addressing the economic crisis, and it would not be possible and not be correct to not proceed on other issues . . . but those issues will be secondary to the economy," he said.

"So if you've interpreted a shift in position, that's correct."

This Tory tactical withdrawal is the latest in a series of syncopated dance steps that Mr. Harper and Mr. Ignatieff have made recently, which suggests they have listened to Canadians and will find a way to pass a budget on Jan. 27.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty recently mused about tax cuts, but they are not necessarily the best way to stimulate the economy in a recession. That's because taxpayers may save the money rather than spend it, and the cuts may lead to a structural deficit rather than a short-term one.

But in Halifax on Thursday, at the launch of his cross-country tour, Mr. Ignatieff said he likes the idea of tax cuts as long as they go to low- and middle-income Canadians.

He said he wants the budget to target "shovel-ready infrastructure," which the Tories have already said they plan to do, and he said the government should cut the EI waiting time

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and boost retraining programs.

In Toronto on Friday, after news that the unemployment rate had gone up to 6.6 per cent last month, Mr. Flaherty spoke about training but not about EI waiting times. Mr. Ignatieff then referred to it as a "test" for the Tories.

It is not a test they are likely to enjoy.

A lot of Conservatives think our EI system is too generous, but the party has not been in a position to do anything about it, given that they are in a minority situation.

When Monte Solberg was the minister in charge of EI, he extended seasonal poegey and took credit for it — although he didn't look like he enjoyed it. Now retired from politics, he wrote a funny column in the Sun papers last week, comparing EI to a pyramid scheme and attacking the idea of shortening the waiting time.

"That's a terrific idea if the government wants to send the message that workers shouldn't look for work immediately after a layoff," he wrote. "If this change happens, then Employment Insurance really will be insurance against the dreaded prospect of having to go in to work in the morning. Think of it as a personal stimulus package that has the odd effect of stimulating people to stay unemployed.

"For some, EI is part of the circle of life," he wrote. "You are born, you get EI for 40 years, you die, and then as a lovely parting gift, you get more EI."

Mr. Flaherty has so far not said anything about shortening the waiting time for EI, but it's a fair bet that he shares Mr. Solberg's views.

But a Nanos poll Friday showed that Mr. Ignatieff has pulled the Liberals even with the Tories nationally and 10 points ahead of the Bloc in Quebec. The Conservatives can't afford to ignore that, so Mr. Flaherty may end up, like Mr. Solberg, enriching a system he dislikes.

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