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El stokes election fever

Conservatives reach out to unemployed workers, but likely to face wrath of Liberals who demand insurance plan overhaul

May 25, 2009 04:30 AM

Comments on this story (114)

**BRUCE CAMPION-SMITH
LES WHITTINGTON
OTTAWA BUREAU**

OTTAWA – Human Resources Minister Diane Finley is announcing improvements to the employment insurance program today, but it will not be enough to head off a clash with the Liberals that threatens to derail the Conservative minority government and force an early-summer election.

Finley's initiative is meant to help laid-off workers, but a senior government source said it's nothing like the major overhaul of EI being demanded by opposition parties as Parliament resumes today.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff has threatened to topple Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government unless the Conservatives reform the EI system to make it easier for workers who lose their jobs to access insurance payments.

The Liberals want the government to establish a national threshold of 360 paid hours of work for people to qualify for EI during the economic downturn. Currently, depending on where someone lives, it takes between 420 and 910 hours of paid work to be eligible.

A government spokesperson said yesterday the Conservatives have no intention of meeting that demand.

Ignatieff says Liberals won't use attack ads

Despite a stern warning that he will "mess" with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff insisted yesterday that his party won't resort to launching personal attack ads.

"It's not meant to be a system that keeps people on employment insurance. It's meant to be a system that encourages people to retrain so that they can support themselves with jobs."

The upshot is that Ignatieff is facing the toughest decision yet of his fledgling leadership – whether to make good on the threat to force an election if EI benefits are not improved.

Meanwhile, some in Conservative circles say the party's new biting partisan ads are the opening volley for a fall election.

This is the political backdrop as MPs, fresh off a week-long break, return to Parliament Hill today for a final sprint to summer – four weeks of debate that promises to be heated and bitter – and enlivened by election fever.

Ignatieff is weighing the advice of some caucus members who suggest the party should strike now, while the Liberals are up in the polls and the Conservatives are dogged by the still-struggling economy.



Diane Finley is set to outline changes to EI system May 25, 2009. CMHC/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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And employment insurance is the one issue that could unite the opposition to bring down the minority government, a common front that might not exist in the fall.

"Mr. Harper should make no assumptions about his ability to just bulldoze his way along here," Liberal House Leader Ralph Goodale said in an interview.

Behind the scenes, the Liberals have put a "rush" on drafting a platform and working on the logistics for a national campaign, moves meant to give Ignatieff the option of sparking a vote.

But pollster Nik Nanos says it's all political bluster and that no party can risk facing the voters in a summer vote when the economy is sour.

"It's like two people playing poker and they're both trying to bluff. A lot of this has to do with posturing," he said.

With their new ads, the Conservatives are sending a signal that they are ready to fight an election even though a vote now could prove risky for the government, Nanos said.

And for all their election bluster, Nanos said the Liberals would be better off waiting as well.

"In their ideal scenario, they would spend more time introducing and defining Michael Ignatieff before they went to the polls. If they leave that to an election, that's when we know that the real attack ads will be taking place," he said.

That said, there are election tripwires to be negotiated in the weeks ahead.

Each of the opposition parties has an "opposition" day when it could present a non-confidence vote that could lead to the government's downfall. There's been speculation that the Conservatives will postpone those days to the final weeks of June in a bid to push any possible election date well into summer.

Goodale said a summer vote, while not ideal, is not a showstopper if the Liberals decide employment insurance is an issue worth going to the polls over and notes his first election was on July 8, 1974.

"There have been elections at a great many different and sometimes inconvenient times of the year," he said.

But if the minority Parliament survives until the summer recess – and many expect it will – the next election window opens in the fall.

The Conservative scenario for a fall vote goes like this – Harper spends the summer making "good news" headlines unveiling billions of dollars in stimulus funding as backroom party operatives continue their own campaign to undercut Ignatieff.

In the fall, with the economy showing signs of a turnaround, he goes to the polls, hoping for a third – and final – minority term that sets the stage for his own exit from politics.

"He knows it's going to be a minority. He's never going to be a majority prime minister. I think his goal is to get in there, win again and then pass the reins," said one Conservative insider.

"He can literally spend the next four months rolling out announcements ... and nobody can say 'you're buying elections,'" the source said.

That's because opposition MPs and groups such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities have been urging the government to spend the stimulus cash earmarked in the Jan. 27 budget faster.

The timing of a fall vote might seem like folly, given that the Conservatives are down in the polls and the economy is still rocky. But the thinking is the Conservatives might strike before Ignatieff has a chance to further raise his profile.

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Reply to kevinf at 9:41

I think you wanted this comment in the "Ignatieff says he won't do attack ads" article but it ended up in the EI article. I will answer your question after you answer mine. How many Canadians do you know that have lived outside of Canada the majority of their adult life and then "come Home" with the expectation to become the Prime Minister? The Ads have nothing to do with Immigrants and Immigration, because Iggy isn't an Immigrant and shame on him for using a card that he doesn't even have in his hand. How very gullible you are that you accepted the Immigrant game from someone who isn't an immigrant. He was born Canadian and chose to live his life OUTSIDE of Canada, not like you and others who chose to live IN Canada.

Submitted by Tired Farmer at 12:03 PM Monday, May 25 2009

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'Adscam' sounds strange today

Funny name/sig for a person who seems to like the Lieberals. Oh, I get it...NDPer/Green voter. Sorry about your luck pal!

Submitted by makemyday at 11:32 AM Monday, May 25 2009

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