



Pray that they elect sanity

By **GREG WESTON**

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As the nation's capital bids good riddance to the soggiest summer since Noah's unfortunate houseboat holiday, a hurricane of hot air is sweeping Parliament Hill with much crazy talk of a fall election.

Forget the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Who cares about soaring unemployment, the bankruptcies, plant closings, lost savings and collapsing pensions?

The honourable members from Mars have a better idea: Let's inject \$300 million of economic stimulus into the lawn sign industry, and waste the rest of the year consumed with a federal election and its aftermath. Brilliant.

Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff emerged from a two-day caucus pep-rally in Sudbury last week, strutting his best gunslinger imitation as he vowed to vote down the Conservative government at the first opportunity.

From now on, he said, the Liberals will not be supporting Stephen Harper's government on any money bills that come before Parliament, the defeat of which would trigger an election.

As Ignatieff put it: "Mr. Harper, your time is up."

This sudden outbreak of election fever and Iggy's apparent political delirium has nothing to do with what matters to Canadians or, heaven forbid, what would be best for the country.

It is pure partisan politicking in all its glorious irrelevance to the real lives of ordinary hard-working folk.

The ruling Conservatives would just as soon stay that way, believing their prospects of winning a majority could be enhanced with time, especially if the economy improves and Ignatieff doesn't.

At the same time, the public opinion polls aren't exactly shining on Jack Layton and the New Democrats who would most likely lose seats if an election were held today.

Even in Quebec, there are no solid signs that an election would dramatically alter the landscape -- the Conservatives and Bloc Quebecois might lose a few seats; the Liberals would likely gain a half-dozen.

On the other hand, one thing the Tories, NDP and Bloc all share is a growing feeling Ignatieff may underwhelm in an election campaign.

If so, why give him time to mature? They may be right.

So far, the former Harvard brainiac has not shown any convincing aptitude (or appetite) for the mindless theatrics of sound-bite politics that unfortunately continue to drive made-for-TV election campaigns.

As the old saw goes, he would make a great politician if he didn't need to get elected.

Perhaps Ignatieff could have made his disdain for political fakery a virtue, doing politics differently and all that.

Instead, his performance is neither natural nor polished, at times both awkward and dangerously unpredictable.

This past week, for instance, Ignatieff told reporters he thought the defining ballot question in the next election will be: "Who is best placed to lead Canada into the economy of tomorrow?"

"The issue is competence and public confidence in fiscal management," he said.

Then this: "We will clean up the deficit without raising taxes."

The media immediately pounced, pressing Ignatieff to explain exactly how he would accomplish that feat.

Awkward shuffle

In response, Ignatieff did an awkward shuffle towards the exits and back to the microphone several times before he finally uttered: "Wait and see."

In the unforgiving heat of an election, campaign disasters are made of lesser things.

As pollster Nik Nanos observes: "Ignatieff can't afford to make any mistakes in an election campaign.

"Voters expect smart people not to make mistakes, and when they do, they tend to be more severely punished."

Iggy's personal performance aside, the Liberals have not articulated any coherent platform or vision of what they might actually do for Canadians in return for the keys to the limo pool.

In short, the entire Liberal election strategy to date largely rests on voters deciding it's time to kick out the Conservatives, signs of which are not yet apparent.

Truth is, the reason Canadians may be heading back to the polls for a fourth time in five years is all about Iggy.

His bizarre brinkmanship in June over employment insurance reforms -- promising to bring down the government and then immediately retreating -- left the Liberal leader looking indecisive, weak and more than a bit silly.

The Liberal leader, having painted himself and his party into a corner, decided the only viable escape is never again having to support the Tories.

Maybe Jack and Steve will go for beers and cut a deal to save us all from another autumn of door-bangers.

Or maybe the Liberals will heed this bit of trivia.

One year ago tomorrow, Stephane Dion led the Liberals into an election campaign and straight off a cliff.

Nanos Research polls going into that election showed the party standings exactly where they are today.

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