

Buoyed by polls, Harper starts transition plan

Confident his party will win a majority, leader consults Mulroney, hires 'red' Tory Hugh Segal to lead team

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TRENTON - With new polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals in a dead heat, Stephen Harper is so confident that he is on the road to victory that he has already begun putting a team in place, led by red Tory Hugh Segal, to ensure a smooth transition into government.

Mr. Harper said he also recently spoke with former prime minister Brian Mulroney, whom he said is very optimistic about his chances of winning and sees similarities between this election and the 1984 election in which his party swept the country, winning a majority government.

"He's very positive. Of course Mr. Mulroney is noted for being a very positive guy. He thinks the Liberals are extremely vulnerable."

Mr. Harper also said yesterday he would be able to work with the Bloc Quebecois on an issue-by-issue basis if the election produces a minority government. But he specified that, unlike Prime Minister Paul Martin, he would not have a formal arrangement with a former member of the separatist Bloc.

"If we were in a minority, you wouldn't run the country as if you have a majority -- you have to run it as if you have a minority and in a minority Parliament, you do have to listen to all parties and in the end you do what's best for the country," said Mr. Harper.

"But look, I will not be doing what Mr. Martin has done. I will not be Lapierre-izing my party. I will not be going out and forming a formal coalition with the Bloc and bringing them under my wing," he said, taking a shot at former Quebec separatist Jean Lapierre, who is now Mr. Martin's Quebec lieutenant.

Called a turncoat by many, Mr. Lapierre was a Liberal, but quit the party when Jean Chretien won the leadership in 1990, and founded the Bloc. He recently returned to the Liberal fold.

Mr. Martin invited him to be his representative in Quebec even before he has won a seat in parliament.

Conservative deputy leader Peter MacKay yesterday also downplayed comments he made Sunday that his party was willing to work with the Bloc Quebecois in a minority government.

"The word coalition never passed my lips, I can assure you," Mr. MacKay said. "That's never



Conservative leader Stephen Harper and his wife, Laureen, are greeted by military personnel at CFB Trenton yesterday, where Mr. Harper revealed his plans to boost military spending and troop levels. Mr. Harper is spending the week in Ontario, where he thinks he has the best shot at beating the Liberals.

CREDIT: Jonathan Hayward, The Canadian Press

been contemplated and I can't imagine a scenario where we would ever enter into a coalition with the Bloc. There's too much ideological difference on our view of the country."

Mr. MacKay said that his earlier statement, that the Conservatives would be open to working with the separatist party on a "case-by-case" basis, is the same offer that would be open to any members of Parliament that wanted to support Tory legislation.

Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe said yesterday that while his party wouldn't work in a formal alliance in any minority government, collaboration on specific issues would be possible.

"We will support everything that is good for Quebec," Mr. Duceppe said at a news conference. "We will oppose everything that's bad for Quebec."

There are four weeks to go in the five-week campaign, and Mr. Harper has not even released his overall campaign platform. But his comments yesterday show a growing sense of optimism that he will be forming the next government. He repeatedly stated that he expects to win a majority, not a minority.

Sources confirmed yesterday that Mr. Segal, who was the former chief of staff to both Ontario premier Bill Davis and Mr. Mulroney, is starting preparations for the potential installation of the Conservatives to government and Mr. Harper, although he declined to be specific, admitted that he has begun discussions with Tories across the country about how the transfer of power would be carried out.

"I have consulted a large number of Conservatives across the country on what would need to be done on transition. I'm getting some advice. I will make a formal announcement when I think that's necessary," Mr. Harper said yesterday after announcing a \$5.5-billion injection into Canada's ailing Armed Forces over the next four years.

A new SES Research opinion survey indicates Liberal support has plunged seven percentage points to 34 per cent since the May 23 election call. Mr. Harper's Conservatives were listed at 31 per cent in the nationwide poll of 600 people, the NDP at 19 per cent and the Bloc at 12 per cent. The poll has a margin of error of 4.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, which means the Liberals and Tories are in a virtual tie.

Sources indicate that in addition to Mr. Segal, who has unique experience in running a minority government at Queen's Park in the 1970s, Mr. Harper has turned to several of his campaign team members for help in the transition as well. They include campaign co-chairmen John Reynolds, who is also House leader, and Montreal lawyer Michael Fortier, who ran for the leadership against Joe Clark in 1998; Tom Flanagan, who is campaign director, and Peter MacKay, who is deputy leader. Senator Pierre Claude Nolin, who could not be reached yesterday, is also said to be helping.

In addition, Paul Terrien, a former speechwriter for Mr. Mulroney, travels on the campaign bus with Mr. Harper and is now writing his speeches. Mr. Mulroney is out of the country and could not be reached yesterday.

The selection of Mr. Segal has been well received by some Conservatives, even those who were aligned with Mr. Clark who refused to be a part of the new party because he believes Mr. Harper is an extremist and not fit to govern Canada. In fact, Mr. Clark practically endorsed Mr. Martin as the best man for the job saying it's "better the devil you know than the devil you don't."

Mr. Segal is "seen as not only a moderate but somebody with a long association with the progressive side of the party," said a senior insider. "He brings comfort and credibility and those are key selling points to getting people on side."

Another senior insider, who was not aware of the transition talks and is not particularly on friendly terms with Mr. Harper, said the Segal initiative is a "very smart move" because he

represents the left wing of the party and would have the potential to bridge the gap between the hard right-wing Canadian Alliance contingent of the party and the left-of-centre Progressive Conservatives. The main criticism of the new united Conservative party is that it is really an Alliance takeover and that all of the "progressive" conservatives have fled to the Liberals.

Later at a rally in Oshawa to about 250 party faithful, Mr. Harper appealed to Ontario voters, saying they have a "national responsibility" to boot the Liberals from office. He said Ontarians have played an almost "single handed role" in giving the Liberals their past three majority governments.

"As a consequence, the federal Liberals have come to take this province for granted. Now is the time to ask ourselves, did the Liberals live up to the confidence put in them by such a great number of Ontarians?" Mr. Harper asked the crowd to a loud response of "No."

The Conservatives are confident they can win about three dozen seats in Ontario, especially in traditional Tory strongholds such as Eastern Ontario, the Durham region, Niagara and the 905 belt surrounding Toronto.

Mr. Harper stressed that his new Conservative party is united and in good financial shape and he pointed to his Ontario campaign co-chairs John Baird, MPP for Nepean-Carleton and a former provincial Tory cabinet minister, to make his point on party unity.

Flanked by a half dozen Conservative candidates from the region, Mr. Harper took a shot at Mr. Martin, saying that just as he used to pretend he doesn't know Jean Chretien, now he acts as if he doesn't know his provincial cousin, Premier Dalton McGuinty.

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