

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PM has 'no appetite' for spring election, insiders say

Harper focused on economy, sources tell CP amid rampant speculation around decision to prorogue

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Forget all that speculation about a spring election.

Stephen Harper has no intention of calling an election or engineering the defeat of his minority government any time soon, insiders close to the Prime Minister say.

“The chances of hell freezing over in March are better than us doing something to trigger an election,” one source said flatly.

“There's no appetite [for an election] in the government, there's no appetite in the PM and there's no appetite in the Canadian public.”

Rather, Mr. Harper intends to keep his focus resolutely fixed on the “issues that matter to Canadians,” first among which is steering the country through the fragile economic recovery, the insider said on condition of anonymity.

Election speculation has been rampant since last week when Mr. Harper prorogued or suspended Parliament, which was to have resumed Jan. 25 after a six-week Christmas break.

Instead, a new session of Parliament will now open March 3 with a Throne Speech, followed by a budget the next day.

To opposition critics and many pundits, the move seems aimed at smothering controversy over the treatment of Afghan detainees and other pesky issues, while setting the stage for an election in the afterglow of Vancouver's Winter Olympic Games and an upbeat, post-recession throne speech and budget.

“I'm sure that's his scheme,” Ralph Goodale, the Liberal House Leader, said in an interview.

“He is simply trying to absolutely dominate the message by eliminating the democratic tools that are normally available to his competition and his opposition. And that, in his very devious mind, is probably intended to set up what he would like to have and that is a free cake walk to an election campaign.”

But Conservatives point out that Mr. Harper couldn't trigger an election without risking a backlash from voters, who seem dead set against the idea. They haven't forgotten how Michael Ignatieff's popularity nosedived last fall after the Liberal Leader pronounced that he'd try to defeat Mr. Harper's minority government at the first opportunity.

With Mr. Ignatieff now gun-shy and promising not to force an election, Mr. Harper would have to pull the plug on his own government – either by directly asking the Governor-General to dissolve Parliament or by including measures so abhorrent to all three opposition parties in the budget that they felt compelled to defeat the government.

Either way, Mr. Harper would take the blame for forcing an election no one appears to want, and risk losing the comfortable lead his party has established in opinion polls over the last five months.

Insiders say Mr. Harper has no intention of taking such a risk. He won't call an election and he won't include any "poison pills" in the budget in a bid to engineer defeat of his government.

There has been some opposition speculation that Mr. Harper might use the budget to reintroduce the idea of scrapping public subsidies for political parties – a move that would financially cripple the Tories' rivals and almost certainly compel them to defeat the government.

Mr. Harper first floated the idea in the 2008 fall economic update, triggering a parliamentary crisis that nearly saw his government toppled by an enraged opposition coalition.

Tory insiders say Mr. Harper remains committed to the idea but won't revisit it in the budget.

"This is something we're going to put to the people of Canada in the next election but not before," the source said.

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