



## **Rush to polls a gamble for Tories: observers**

By SUE BAILEY

OTTAWA (CP) - The Conservatives may enjoy some tantalizing advantages over the Liberals these days, but observers say an unseemly rush to the polls is still a huge gamble that could end badly.

This is especially true because a majority victory is hardly assured, they say.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's minority government continues to stall around 33 per cent of voter support in repeated national surveys. It's a reality that assures similar if not identical results to the last election held just over a year ago.

And that's the bottom line amid the snap-election speculation - much of it Tory-and media-generated - that's buzzing around official Ottawa.

"There's a risk here," says longtime Liberal strategist Warren Kinsella. "There's no clear sailing at all to a majority.

"I don't think these guys are ready to pull the chute and jump. I think they're testing like crazy, they're polling like crazy. But Harper, at the end of the day, is a very strategic prime minister. I don't think he's ready to completely roll the dice just yet."

Nor do the opposition parties have any obvious reason to bring the minority Conservatives down any time soon. The Liberals under fledgling leader Stephane Dion are comparatively cash-strapped as organizers race to line up nominations and finalize a party platform.

New Democrat Leader Jack Layton faces twin challenges from the Liberals and the Green Party in any election, while surveys suggest that Bloc Quebecois support has waned in Quebec.

As for the prospect that the Conservatives would engineer their own defeat, political stars would have to align, observers say.

For starters, it would help if Jean Charest's Quebec Liberals triumphed in a provincial election expected to be called any day now. A Liberal win

over the separatist Parti Quebecois would be a demoralizing blow to the federal Bloc Quebecois that relies on the same organizational ground troops.

It would also rob Dion of a chance to don the federal-unity cape he earned with his work on the Clarity Act that set out clear terms for Quebec secession.

The Tories could also use the kind of boost in voter surveys that has so far eluded them.

"The biggest factor they have to consider would be that they seem to be stuck in the mid-30s in just about every poll," says Peter Donolo, who served as communications director for former prime minister Jean Chretien.

"On top of that would be the grumpiness of people heading into their third federal election in three years."

The blame game over election triggering tends to quickly fade once campaigns get under way, Donolo said.

But its potential impact can't be underestimated, he stressed. Just ask former Ontario premier David Peterson, who lost the 1990 provincial campaign to the NDP - a jaw-dropping twist of fortunes that was in part blamed on an early election call.

"I think David Peterson paid a really significant price for being seen to be opportunistic," Donolo says.

Still, Harper enjoys some significant advantages that could play into any move to craft his own defeat.

"Stephen Harper has improved his image on virtually all measures," says Ottawa pollster Nick Nanos of SES Research.

"I think what this shows is that he has exceeded expectations."

A recent SES phone survey of 1,000 people between Feb. 2 and 8 found that 41 per cent of respondents said Harper is the most competent federal leader, up from 24 per cent last January.

Twenty-two per cent of respondents said Dion was the most competent compared with 13 per cent for Jack Layton and eight per cent for Gilles Duceppe.

"Leadership is traditionally one of the key ballot questions when people

go into the voting booth," Nanos said. "It's usually a combination of leadership and a hot-button issue."

Harper may not be Canada's most charismatic prime minister ever, Nanos said. "But there's a pretty healthy dose of respect for the man."