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PM defends bill to limit senators terms

OTTAWA Stephen Harper is taking his pitch for Senate reform directly to appointees of the much maligned upper house.

CANADA/WORLD

The prime minister will make an unprecedented appearance today before a special Senate committee, which is examining his proposal to limit the term of new senators to eight years.

Senators currently sit for as many as 45 years before being compelled to retire at 75. But Liberal strategists privately suspect Harper's appearance is also meant to be a veiled warning to the Liberal-dominated Senate that Harper won't tolerate any attempt by unelected senators to derail legislation that is close to his heart.

It's a warning that could apply equally to another important bill — Harper's vaunted Federal Accountability Act currently under study by the Senate's legal and constitutional affairs committee. On Tuesday, Liberals on the committee blocked a Conservative attempt to wrap up hearings by Sept. 26 on the accountability legislation, which is aimed at cleaning up government in the wake of Liberal-era corruption scandals. Liberal senators insist major changes are needed to the act, an insistence that could lead to an impasse with the Harper government that only an election could break.

The Senate reform proposal is in for a similarly rocky ride. During hearings yesterday, several Liberal senators were skeptical that the proposal is constitutional and suggested the matter should be referred to the Supreme Court of Canada for advice before proceeding any further.

Limiting senatorial terms has been touted by the government as a first step toward more comprehensive Senate reform. Harper has promised to put a process for electing senators in place by the next federal election.

Some senators expressed hope yesterday that Harper will use his appearance, the first ever by a sitting prime minister before a Senate committee, to spell out his plan for electing senators.

By itself, the term-limit bill means a senator could be reappointed by the prime minister to serve a second eightyear term, said political scientist Leslie Seidle. Any senator hoping to be reappointed would tend to be less critical of government initiatives and more compliant with the prime minister's wishes, he said.

The Canadian Press

Tories slipping, Green Party rising in polls

OTTAWA • The issues of Mideast politics, defence and environmental stewardship have helped unravel Conservative plans to sail ahead into majority-government territory, a new poll suggests.

A Decima poll over the holiday weekend and released to The Canadian Press yesterday, said support for the Conservatives was at 34 per cent among decided voters, or two points lower than the level reached on election day. Nationally the Liberals were at 30 per cent, the NDP at 14 per cent and the Bloc at 11 per cent.

The Green Party, with new leader Elizabeth May, came in at a surprising 10 per cent – more than double the 4.5 per cent they garnered on election day. In Ontario, the leaderless Liberals

held 41 per cent compared with 35 per cent for the Tories.

But perhaps most troublesome for the party were the standings in Quebec, where the Tories slipped to 20 per cent from 25 per cent on election day in late January. The province is where many Conservative strategists saw their best hopes for securing a majority government.

The results are consistent with other polls released in recent weeks by SES Research and Quebec-based CROP.

Decima's Bruce Anderson says the situation in the Middle East, and the conflict in Afghanistan in particular, has slapped a ceiling on Conservative support.

"The real point of concern for some





whether Canadians seems to be whether Canada was articulating a point of view that was significantly independent from that of the (U.S. President George W.) Bush administration," Anderson said.

"I think the Conservatives pay more of a price in Ontario and Quebec when that issue rears its head."

The Canadian Press

List maps out Ontario's worst roads

TORONTO • Frustrated and bruised Ontario motorists are being encouraged to submit their candidates for the bumpiest, most potholed and spinetwisting road in the province.

The Municipal Roads Coalition's fourth annual Worst Roads contest has added significance this year, say organizers: local politicians are gearing up for Ontario's municipal elections in November.

The annual list of worst roads sends a "powerful message" to municipal politicians about how best to spend gas tax revenues, said Kris Barnier of the Canadian Automobile Association, one of the coalition's members.

Motorists are being encouraged to vote for their candidate for worst municipal road through the coalition's website: www.worstroads.ca.

Meanwhile, motorists in the trafficchoked 905 region just outside of Toronto will find out today who has it worst when it comes to commuting into the city. Carmaker Saturn is sponsoring an event to determine how long it takes to reach the downtown core from three directions 60 kilometres away.

Since launching the worst-road contest in 2003, the coalition has put a spotlight on 46 offensive roads.

The group said municipal governments claim to have taken action to fix 86 per cent of those roads. Sixty-five per cent have undergone repairs or are being fixed, and another 21 per cent are scheduled for repairs this year.

Barnier said the survey also brings pressure to bear on the provincial government to help municipalities with funding to get bad or downright dangerous roads repaired. The 2005 "winner" was Steeles Avenue but other roads that made the top 10 were from such cities as Ottawa, Kingston, London, Sudbury and Thunder Bay.

The Canadian Press

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