

Legislation

Talk of prorogation, confidence votes, heat up for fall session

Government is said to prorogue any time now and return to fall business after the Oct. 10 Ontario election

By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH



Despite talk of a fall Throne Speech and threats from opposition parties to pull the plug on the 39th Parliament, the political landscape is still so volatile that for any party to trigger an

election would be to “roll the dice,” says SES Research pollster **Nik Nanos**.

“Well, I don’t think that anyone has the upper hand right now and anyone who would take the chance of triggering an election is really rolling the dice. We would not know what the outcome of an election would be at this point,” Mr. Nanos said. “I don’t think we could underestimate the risk of an election. If **Gilles Duceppe** thinks that the Bloc can capitalize on the mission in Afghanistan as a wedge issue, if **Jack Layton** thinks he can do the same, or even if **Stéphane Dion** can use Afghanistan or the environment as a wedge issue, it wouldn’t really take a big shift in public opinion to go from a Conservative minority government to a Liberal minority government. That’s how volatile things are.”

Although the House is scheduled to return on Sept. 17, Conservative sources said the government is likely to prorogue Parliament and that the House would not return until after the Ontario provincial election on Oct. 10. One source said the government will definitely prorogue and return after the Ontario election. Another Conservative source said “it wouldn’t look good” if the government prorogued Parliament and delivered a Throne Speech before the Ontario election. The government is likely to prorogue before Sept. 17 and return on Oct. 15, after three federal byelections in Quebec and a scheduled Thanksgiving break. “My guess is that they’ll prorogue,” the Conservative source said. “We’re approaching two years. It’s almost a given.”

L. Ian MacDonald, a columnist for the *Montreal Gazette*, also wrote last week that the government will prorogue this session of Parliament “any day now” and return for a Speech from the Throne on Oct. 16.

Opposition parties, however, told *The Hill Times* that if the government does prorogue Parliament, it is a sign of weakness.

“I think what that says is that the government has really come to a dead end,” said Liberal House Leader **Ralph Goodale** (Wascana, Sask.). “The idea of prorogation and a Throne Speech is all aimed toward rejuvenating the government’s image because the polls would say very clearly that they’re stuck exactly where they started. If he does prorogue and move to a new session of Parliament, it’s a clear

effort to create that kind of image distraction. It’s an indication of the government trying desperately to try to create a distraction and turn the page.”

NDP House Leader **Libby Davies** (Vancouver East, B.C.) told *The Hill Times* that although the decision to prorogue the House is Prime Minister **Stephen Harper’s** (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) alone, it would be a “huge mistake politically” if he did so. “We’ve set the calendar for Parliament. We’ve all agreed to it, it says that we’re going back on Sept. 17, we should be going back on Sept. 17,” she said. “There are very pressing issues to deal with and if he prorogues the House, it’s only because he’s engineering his own political agenda to avoid public scrutiny, and Question Period and committees.”

NDP Leader **Jack Layton** (Toronto Danforth, Ont.), meanwhile, indicated that the environment and climate change would be an issue to campaign on. The government released its plan to meet the Kyoto Protocol under Bill C-288, the Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act, with nothing additional from its previous plan, *Turning the Corner*, released in April. Mr. Layton told *The Globe and Mail* that the government is provoking an election by not seriously complying with the law.

“It is an explicit and important example of how the government is not respecting the wishes of the majority of elected Parliamentarians,” Mr. Layton said. “They can’t expect our party to take that kind of disrespect lying down.”

The government’s plan, “A Climate Change Plan for the Purposes of the Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act 2007,” released last week, stated that the government “is committed to reducing Canada’s total emissions of greenhouse gases, relative to 2006 levels by 20 per cent by 2020 and by 60 per cent to 70 per cent by 2050.” Reaching those targets uses a regulatory framework that requires the industrial sector to reduce its intensity of emissions by 18 per cent by 2010 and two per cent each year after that.

The government’s plan also outlines other initiatives such as the phasing out of incandescent light bulbs, which was also announced in April, and regulating fuel efficiency in new automobiles by giving tax incentives to consumers, announced in Budget 2007. Other initiatives include investments in research and development of new technologies such as renewable energy and biofuels, and investing in provincial environmental projects.

“The real reductions in emissions that will be driven by the government’s new regulations, coupled with the impacts of both the non-regulatory actions and ambitious new initiatives being taken by provincial and territorial governments, mean that Canada’s

greenhouse gas emissions from all sources are expected to decline as early as 2010 and no later than 2012. Thereafter, absolute emissions will continue to decline,” the plan states.

Under the Kyoto Protocol, Canada is obligated to reduce its emissions to six per cent below 1990 levels, however, and environmental experts say the government’s plan will not meet that obligation. Moreover, they say that not only is the government breaking international law, it is also breaking domestic law by not complying with Bill C-288, which specifically calls for a plan that will meet the Kyoto targets.

Last week, both the NDP and the Liberals called for the government to pass Bill C-30, the opposition-revised Clean Air Act, before any move is made to prorogue Parliament. If it is prorogued, however, Mr. Dion (Saint Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) told reporters last Thursday in the National Press Theatre that it should be one of the bills on the list of bills to be revived when the House is recalled. “If they [shut down Parliament] and they go to another Throne Speech, everybody knows, everybody, that the risk of an election is going up,” Mr. Dion said. “I can’t speak for the other parties, but there’s no chance, or no risks I should say, that Liberal MPs would rise in support of a Throne Speech that we judged was going against the best interests of Canadians and the honour of our country.”

NDP MP **Nathan Cullen** (Skeena Bulkley Valley, B.C.) said although he doesn’t believe the government will prorogue Parliament, Bill C-30 should be one of the first bills to be recalled. “I just don’t see the intelligence of the government killing all of their own bills, which the government would effectively do in order to have a new Parliament and pretend that they’re new and we know that they’re not Canada’s New Government,” he told *The Hill Times*. “In terms of C-30, in a new House, that should be the first thing introduced. We’ve done the work, my goodness. If they want to call it C-1 or whatever, it doesn’t matter. I don’t care about the name. They just need to get something done.”

Mr. Nanos said from a public opinion perspective, Canadians don’t care about the details of the plans when it comes to the environment; they’re concerned that things are getting done.

“Canadians just aren’t interested in the details of a lot of these initiatives like the Kyoto Protocol. They’re probably more concerned about whether the government has an environmental strategy that kind of feels right from the viewpoint of an average voter,” he said. “I think what the Conservatives have to watch out for is that there’s a view that their strategy on this issue just reinforces the fact that they are inflexible and can’t work with the other parties to find a Canadian solution. In a way, it’s the style of handling the issue that a lot of times says more about the government than the details or the legal details of what they’re doing.”

Meanwhile, Bloc Québécois leader **Gilles Duceppe** (Laurier Sainte Marie, Que.) told reporters after his party’s caucus meeting last week that he would make Canada’s role in Afghanistan an issue when the House returns. If there is a Throne Speech, Mr. Duceppe said the Conservatives would have to clearly state that the Canadian military would leave Afghanistan when the mission ends in 2009, otherwise the Bloc would not support the Throne Speech, which is a confidence measure.

“If Stephen Harper pursues his militaristic logic, he cannot count on the support of the Bloc in a Throne Speech,” Mr. Duceppe said last Thursday, two days after a Quebec soldier from the Van Doos regi-

ment, and the same day two others from the 22nd regiment died in Afghanistan. “We are asking him to be very clear and write in the Throne Speech that it is over in February 2009.... If Mr. Harper wants to stay longer than February 2009, we’ll debate it across Quebec in an election campaign.”

However the way the numbers now shape up in the House of Commons, the Conservatives can win a confidence vote in the House with any single opposition party. In other words, all three opposition parties would need to vote against the government on a confidence vote to dissolve the 39th Parliament.

Mr. Nanos said although foreign affairs has never really been a wedge issue during election campaigns, Canada in Afghanistan could be significant if there is an election this fall after a potential Throne Speech. “The persistent news about the mission in Afghanistan and the fact that usually the news is not good kind of makes it more of an issue. Until the government recalibrates the mission, I think the political reality we’re all in is that Afghanistan is just going to be on the radar because it’s in the news everyday,” he said.

Mr. Goodale said because of these negative issues for the Conservatives, they are trying to stay out of the spotlight for as long as possible which is why they want to prorogue Parliament and delay MPs from returning to the House of Commons. The government wants to be the one to set the agenda, rather than having to respond to it, he said. “I think they are trying desperately to change the channel, turn the page, to try to reinvent themselves and start all over again. That would involve as much publicity as the Prime Minister could get during the summer without the democratic nuisance of an opposition to call him to account in the House of Commons. So, it would be a perfectly logical political strategy for him, not a very forthcoming and transparent one, but a perfectly logical one from a purely partisan point of view to keep Parliament out of session for as long as possible,” Mr. Goodale said.

Mr. Nanos said this is a good strategy for the Conservative government to gain some attention. If they come out with a new Throne Speech in the fall, it will highlight positive initiatives for the government, even if they don’t put Afghanistan or the environment in the speech.

“What they’re doing is changing the channel to focus on issues they believe they’re stronger on. Let’s face it. Even though Afghanistan and the environment are important issues, I don’t think you can underestimate the attention that tax reductions has on the public. It affects people’s daily lives and it doesn’t diminish the importance of the other issues, but what it does is refocus the electorate,” Mr. Nanos said.

For her part, however, Ms. Davies said proroguing and starting again is not a “wise political decision” in the long run. “I think if you’re the government, you’ve got to be prepared to work in Parliament and face your opposition and defend your own program,” she said. “I would see it as a sign of weakness if Mr. Harper prorogues the House. ... We’re there to represent the people of Canada from all the different viewpoints that we have and they if can’t accept that, then that’s a sign of their own weakness. So what will happen? Well, they’ll continue to do what they want to do politically and the public will lose out from knowing that the opposition is there and it will be more difficult to hold the government to account if Parliament doesn’t sit.”

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