

Chances of spring election slim, Ottawa insiders say

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Ottawa • The likelihood of a federal election this spring, or even this year, appears to be dwindling even though some in the Conservative government ranks may be eager to campaign now, Ottawa insiders said yesterday.

Among the reasons being cited against a federal campaign this year include a number of provincial votes in the offing, and a need to bolster organization in Quebec.

Published reports yesterday indicated the Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, wants to call byelections for vacant seats in Quebec to gauge Conservative support there before deciding on a federal election date. But Dimitri Soudas, a spokesman for the Prime Minister, said there is no link between the byelections and a federal election date.

"I recall the Prime Minister, for the last two-and-a-half months, saying he has no intention on calling a federal election," Mr. Soudas said.

"There is a time frame for calling those byelections and it is the Prime Minister's prerogative as to when to call those byelections."

There are two vacant seats in Quebec, vacated last Jan. 28 and Feb. 21. The Prime Minister has up to six months following the vacancy date to schedule a by-election — meaning the date of at least one byelection must be set by July 28.

A federal election could be triggered if the Prime Minister asks the Governor-General to dissolve Parliament, or if the three opposition parties vote together to defeat the government on a confidence matter.

But political strategists said yesterday there is growing evidence that neither scenario will unfold this year.

First, they say there could be up to five provincial elections held in the coming months — in Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Newfoundland. The latter two provinces have mandated election dates this fall.

"This makes it more difficult to have a national election," said one source with ties to the Conservative Party. Saskatchewan, in particular, would pose problems because NDP Premier Lorne Calvert's campaign would likely target the federal Conservatives over the revamped equalization payment scheme. The Conservatives hold 14 seats in the province, with the Liberals holding the other two.

Conservative insiders privately say the government should also let anger over equalization subsidy in Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia before seeking a new mandate. Those provinces account for 17 of the government's 125 seats, and the Conservatives would need to hang on to them if they hope to form a majority.

Election speculation has been fuelled in part by the results of Quebec's recent provincial campaign, in which the right-leaning Action Démocratique du Québec finished second to the federalist Liberals. Sources say this view is championed by some Conservative MPs from Quebec.

But Ottawa insiders note the ADQ has little to no on-the-ground organization. If Mr. Harper wants to capitalize on ADQ success, he would be wiser to wait for the party led by Mario Dumont to establish itself.

Moreover, polls suggest the Conservatives are not quite in majority territory, although Mr. Harper is regularly identified as the best leader. A recent poll from SES Research suggested 42% of Canadians cited Mr. Harper as the best choice as Prime Minister. Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion and the NDP's Jack Layton were both in the 17% range.

Those numbers suggest neither is likely to bring down the government and risk a poor showing at the polls. The Bloc Québécois would also be reluctant, given the recent poor showing by the separatist Parti Québécois.

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