

## **Tories put election engine in gear**

**John Ivison, National Post**

Published: Wednesday, February 14, 2007

There's an old political proverb in Ottawa that observes: When one or two of the Prime Minister's debate preparation team are gathered together, an election shall surely follow in short order.

And so it was that Line Maheux, Mike Harris's former communications director, and Michael Coates, the president of Hill and Knowlton Canada, were breaking bread yesterday in an Ottawa steakhouse.

Coincidence? Perhaps. But the capital is on red election alert, after a period of relative calm. Sources suggest the Conservatives will have all their candidates in place before the federal budget next month and yesterday the party released a new batch of French-language attack ads.

The Tories appear to believe that Liberal leader Stephane Dion has hit the high-water mark of his popularity and that a majority is within reach.

The thinking is that the Liberals have handed the Conservatives an excuse to trigger a trip to the polls: Kyoto.

The three opposition parties are arrayed against the Tories on the environment and some Liberals have appeared positively eager to fight an election on the issue. Unfortunately for them, the government might use Kyoto as a catalyst but has no intention of fighting, and probably dying, on that hill.

Instead, the Tories will campaign on a budget that is likely to drive spending far above the 7.1% increase anticipated by the government last November. The aim is to take every conceivable cleavage issue -- the environment, the fiscal imbalance, postsecondary education spending -- off the board before an election. The \$1.5-billion pre-budget announcement on the environment this week is a case in point -- use the larger-than-expected surplus to salve concerns that this government doesn't care about global warming.

The goal is to have an election about leadership. The latest SES poll suggests Stephen Harper scores well against Mr. Dion in terms of trustworthiness, competence and vision. Whereas the past two elections were about whether Mr.

Harper could be trusted with the keys to the corner office, voters seem to have decided he is doing an acceptable job.

Now the question is whether they have confidence in Mr. Dion's vision. It is a subject that makes even die-hard Liberals blanch. The decision to let lapse the anti-terror measures brought by the Liberal government is seen by some Grits as an ill-judged shift to the left that simply cedes ground to the Conservatives. The legislation, which gives police the power to detain someone they suspect is about to commit a terrorist act, was introduced after Sept. 11 and included a sunset clause which is about to come due. By aligning himself with the NDP and the Bloc in opposition to the extension of the measures, Mr. Dion is opening himself up to accusations he is soft on terror, say some veteran Liberals.

At the same time, wild pronouncements on Canada's Kyoto commitments by the Liberal leader and some of his team have set off alarm bells that he may be prepared to sacrifice the economy at the altar of climate change

And on the one file where the Conservatives are clearly vulnerable-- the decision to tax income trusts -- the Liberals yesterday came out with a confusing hybrid solution that will allow the government to point out that the Opposition agrees trusts should be taxed.

It seems a strange strategy to go fishing on the crowded left bank of Canadian politics when the bulk of the voters are in the middle of the pond. In the last election, the Liberals lost votes to the Conservatives, not the NDP -- the Tory vote rose by 6.7% to 36.3%, almost the same amount the Liberal vote dropped, while NDP support rose just 1.8 points. Of the 30 seats the Liberals lost, only five were to the NDP.

"The battleground in the next election will be the suburbs, some urban enclaves and medium- sized cities. I don't know how shifting to the left works in any of these places," said Darrell Bricker of pollsters Ipsos Reid.

Mr. Dion might invoke the words of Martin Luther: "Here I stand, I can do no other." But if that is the case, he will likely join the pantheon of principled, and largely unsuccessful, politicians who waited in vain for the world to appreciate their convictions.