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**Stephen Harper decides that patience should not be the Conservatives' virtue**

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"A PRINCE never lacks legitimate reasons to break his promise." Stephen Harper, Canada's Conservative prime minister, is poised to test this bit of Machiavellian political theory. Having championed legislation last year to fix election dates at four-year intervals, thus curtailing the ability of future governments to call a vote when victory seemed most assured, Mr Harper is now about to ignore his own law and announce a general election within days. With no overarching issue preoccupying voters still awakening from their summer slumber and with four by-elections set for September, which a general election would pre-empt, Mr Harper presumably has strong reasons for wanting to face the electorate a year before the set date of October 19th 2009. But what are they?

Probably not the one that the prime minister tested on the media at a press conference in late August: that the Liberals, Bloc Québécois and New Democratic Party, who collectively hold 173 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, are intent on opposing the government and blocking its agenda. It can hardly come as a surprise to Mr Harper, who has led a minority government since the January 2006 election, that opposition parties believe their job in a parliamentary system is to challenge the government. Nor does his claim of blockage stand much scrutiny. The Conservatives have managed to get 70 government bills, including three budgets and two economic statements, through parliament and have survived more than 40 votes of confidence.

What is more likely is that the prime minister saw so many storm clouds on the horizon—a weakening economy,

mounting Canadian casualties in Afghanistan, the question of how to deal with a new administration in America and the threat that several scandals may come to a head—that going now became more appealing than being caught in a deluge later. He has dared and double-dared the opposition to force an election and so do the job for him, to no avail. “Fish or cut bait!” he commanded Stéphane Dion, leader of the Liberal Party, earlier this summer. Mr Dion said later that he did indeed go fishing on holiday.

The nightmare scenario for the Conservatives is that the economy, dragged down by slow growth south of the border (Canada’s most important export market) and by the impact of a strong Canadian dollar, will deteriorate to the point that the federal government will post a budget deficit after more than a decade of surpluses. Economic growth for the first six months of 2008 was almost imperceptible, lower than projections made in the February budget. Having spent the double-digit surpluses of previous years on such things as tax cuts, defence procurement and debt repayment, the Conservatives have little fiscal leeway.

The American election on November 4th could also sway Canadian voters, whose proximity to the United States means they are exposed to much of its media coverage. Should a wind of change sweep Barack Obama into office, it might also provide a handy tailwind for the left-of-centre Liberal party to America’s north. Regardless of which candidate wins in America, their focus on the environment spells bad news for Mr Harper, whose government has struggled to come up with a green plan that does not antagonise voters in the energy-rich western province of Alberta, which the prime minister calls home. A Liberal promise to institute what Mr Dion says will be a revenue-neutral carbon tax has burnished his leadership credentials while accentuating the difference on environmental issues between the two main parties.

Other looming troubles may appear less significant, but any of them could flare up given the right mix of circumstances. The Conservatives are currently in court challenging a ruling by the commissioner of elections that they broke financing rules in 2006. Also, a long-promised public inquiry into the business dealings of Brian Mulroney, a former Conservative prime minister and Harper adviser, will start hearings early next year. And the casualty list from Afghanistan, a war that Mr Harper has strongly backed despite its unpopularity among Canadians, continues to grow, reaching 96 soldiers, including three killed on September 3rd.

Not all of the unspoken reasons for seeking an election sooner rather than later are negative. The Conservatives say they can fight the campaign, which must run a minimum of 36 days, without borrowing money. Not so the Liberals, with Mr Dion still repaying debts from his December 2006 leadership campaign. Moreover, the Conservatives may benefit from a swing in their direction in voter-rich Quebec.

Mr Harper gets more points for personal leadership in opinion polls than his Liberal counterpart and one new opinion poll puts the Conservatives at 37% and the Liberals at 29%, virtually unchanged since January 2006. So why call an election at all, if nothing will change? Canadians may not have warmed to his party, but Mr Harper still privately hopes for a majority and at least one pollster reckons a majority is within his reach, if not in his grasp. Machiavelli would surely have thought that good enough reason for an early election.