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Canada's politics

Here we go again

Will yet another election break Canada's parliamentary gridlock at last?

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CANADIANS have been to the polls three times in the past seven years. On March 23rd the country's three opposition parties vowed to bring down the minority Conservative government at the first opportunity, either by rejecting its budget or by a no-confidence vote. As *The Economist* went to press, an election seemed inevitable—only a last-minute change of heart by one of the parties before a vote is called could prevent one. Yet according to recent polls, voters are likely to choose a Parliament almost identical to today's. So why are Canada's parties spoiling for a fight?

The budget itself probably has little to do with it. Because the Conservatives have promised to bring the C\$40.5 billion (\$41.3 billion) federal deficit down to nearly zero by 2014-15, Stephen Harper, the prime minister (left, above) has proposed little new spending. What largesse he is offering has been sliced and diced to appeal to specific interest groups, including elderly people on low incomes, families with children in arts programmes, health-care researchers and volunteer firefighters. Business leaders were especially pleased that the Conservatives did not give in to the opposition Liberals' demand to delay corporate income tax cuts scheduled for next year.

The main reason an election is imminent is that both Canada's main parties think that with a successful campaign they can defy the polls to break the country's political stalemate. The Conservatives finished first in both the 2006 and 2008 elections, but could not win a majority, making them the longest-serving minority government in Canadian history. The parties' poll numbers have barely budged in the past five years.

The centrist Liberals, who ruled for almost 13 years before losing to Mr Harper, see this as proof that the Conservatives have already hit their electoral ceiling. Although Michael Ignatieff, the Liberal leader (right, above), has so far proved wooden and snooty on the hustings, the party hopes that he has discovered how to connect with voters on a recent series of cross-country tours. He calls the Conservatives the "Republican Party North"—a slur in Canada—and paints Mr Harper as an autocrat obsessed with secrecy who is undermining Canada's democracy. A Liberal-

dominated legislative committee recently found the government in contempt of Parliament for not disclosing the cost of its plans to punish more crimes with jail time and to lengthen prison sentences.

The Conservatives say that the country's economic recovery is too fragile to hold an "unnecessary election". However, they have been preparing for a campaign for months. In 2008 Mr Harper fell just 12 seats short of a majority in the 308-seat House of Commons, mainly because of his unwise criticism of funding for arts groups, which caused a backlash in Quebec. His party's strategists think he can take control of the chamber this time.

Mr Harper will run on his economic record, touting his popular stimulus programme as the cause of Canada's resilience in the world recession and its strong bounce-back. His attack advertisements criticise Mr Ignatieff for spending most of his adult life abroad, and question his claims about the poverty of his immigrant parents. The Conservatives are better financed than their rivals, and can focus on the most closely contested districts, since the Liberals have virtually no appeal to Mr Harper's base of western voters.

With just 77 seats in the Commons, the Liberals could not force an election on their own. But the smaller opposition parties, who have supported the Conservatives on big votes in the past, are no longer inclined to save Mr Harper. The Bloc Québécois, a separatist party that only runs candidates in French-speaking Quebec, comfortably leads the polls in its home province. And the New Democratic Party (NDP), a leftist outfit close to organised labour, is demanding more than the budget's few token measures for the elderly and energy efficiency as the price for shoring up the right-wing Conservatives.

On election day the hopes of both the main parties will probably be disappointed. The most likely result of the poll, which should be held in early May, is another Conservative minority. However, that may not be enough to keep Mr Harper in power. In 2008, after the Conservatives proposed ending public subsidies for political parties, the Liberals and the NDP tried to form a coalition government with the support of the Bloc Québécois. That backfired when Mr Harper then suspended Parliament, arguing that toppling the winner in an election was undemocratic, and that his rivals were betraying the country by allying with separatists. The Liberals have studiously avoided talk of reviving this plan. But given how stable Britain's coalition government appears, if the Conservatives lose enough seats, the opposition may be tempted to try again.

Barring another effort to form a coalition, the country's political landscape will probably survive the election pretty much unchanged. No wonder polls show that 85% of Canadians do not pay attention to politics. Parliamentary observers complain that the fragmented legislature has made the country's politics more negative and short-term. But Mr Harper has managed to govern effectively despite his lack of a majority. If Canada's Parliament remains divided, that is because its people are divided as well.

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