

'Huge risks' in campaign for 3 leaders

Jobs could be at stake for Dion, Layton and even Harper in upcoming election

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OTTAWA—When an election campaign starts, three of Canada's political leaders will be fighting for more than seats. They could be fighting to keep their jobs.

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion, NDP Leader Jack Layton and even Prime Minister Stephen Harper could each find himself forced out of his party's top job if election results prove disappointing.

"There's actually huge risks for all these guys. Probably the greatest for Dion," said pollster Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research. "He has the grim possibility of going to the electorate the first time and striking out."

But low expectations could also work in Dion's favour, Graves said.

"The real wild card in all this is how well Dion will do. He's got a lot of things working in his favour, not the least of which that the bar has been set so low," Graves said.

Since taking over the helm of the Liberals in 2006, Dion, 52, has struggled with language and his own popular appeal. He's now staked his 20-month tenure as leader – and his party's fortunes – on a carbon tax proposal that's playing to mixed reaction.

Even now, Liberal insiders concede that Dion is an "unknown political commodity" and they are unsure how he will perform under the constant spotlight of a campaign when politicians have to stay on message yet be able to instinctively react to rapidly developing events.

"We have no real insights into how well he will perform ... We have so few clues after 20 months of him being in the leader's position as to what he will accomplish as a campaign figure," said a party strategist.

That's why voters can expect a "go-slow" approach for the early days of the Liberal campaign to allow Dion to find his footing.

To succeed, Liberals are advising Dion he must "remind Canadians why they dislike Stephen Harper." As well, he must convince voters that the Liberals' carbon tax strategy is "not a risky plan." He also has to persuade the electorate that he's ready to serve as prime minister.

A weekend *Toronto Star*/Angus Reid poll laid bare the challenge ahead of Dion. It showed that Harper, 49, is perceived as a strong and decisive leader, giving him a critical advantage over Dion.

But polls also continue to show that neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives have a clear edge going into the election, making the outcome risky even for Harper.

"Will he definitely do way better this time? I don't know. That to me is an iffy proposition," Graves said.

The control Harper and the Tories have exhibited make the leader's future at the head of the party appear more certain, and insiders say that he'll have a mandate to stay if he wins a stronger minority.

Since winning power in 2006, Harper has exerted strict discipline in his caucus and cabinet, often letting ministers wither in his shadow and making it clear that no one should get too ambitious with ideas of succeeding him while he occupies the country's top elected post.

But if the Conservatives fail to improve their standing, or see their seat count reduced, "the knives will be out," Graves said.

Layton's strategy is to campaign for the job of prime minister rather than simply for the role of being a moral voice in the Commons on issues like health care, child care and poverty, a party strategist said.

"Layton has been consistently polling ahead of Dion, and even (Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles) Duceppe in Quebec. If that's Jack Layton's greatest asset, why the heck would he not put it at the top of his campaign?"

Elected to lead the federal party in 2003, Layton, 58, could face pressure to step aside if his personal popularity doesn't translate into more seats. This election could be the last for Duceppe, 61. His short-lived run for the leadership of the Parti Québécois last year suggested he's ready to move on after 11 years as leader of the Bloc.

