

May 31, 2004. 05:59 AM

Battle for a minority

Ex-Liberal cabinet minister makes frank admission on vote
Tobin's prediction mirrors gloomy results of recent polls

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA—Prominent Liberals and Conservatives are both saying they don't expect to win enough seats to form a majority government, as the federal election enters its second week.

Yesterday, former Liberal cabinet minister and leadership contender Brian Tobin said flatly that his party could only count on a minority government if Canadians went to the polls right now.

His comments and those of other strategists follow an EKOS poll done for the Toronto Star and La Presse last week showing the Liberals headed for a minority government. Other polls since have shown similar results.

"At this point of the game, if there was an election tomorrow, and if we looked at the polls, we would have a minority government," Tobin said on CTV's *Question Period*. He later said he was confident voters would ultimately choose "stability" with the Liberals.

On the same program, Conservative Deputy Leader Peter MacKay spoke candidly about how his party would fare.

"I think it's highly possible that we will form a minority government, and I also believe that you have to approach that on a case-by-case basis," MacKay said.

To win a majority, a party would have to capture at least 155 of the 308 seats up for grabs in the June 28 vote.

Minority governments have been elected just eight times in the 37 elections since Confederation, most recently in 1979.

The fact the two leading parties are talking this openly about minority government demonstrates this election may be growing too close to call.

In a Toronto Star poll released over the weekend, 61 per cent of respondents said they expected the election would yield a minority government — most likely a Liberal one.

The poll also showed that this was a real possibility in a race that has quickly shaped up to be a fierce, closely-fought contest in almost every region of the country, especially in vote-rich Ontario, where 40 per cent of voters are leaning to the Liberals, while 35 per cent lean to the Conservatives and 22 per cent to the New Democrats.

Overall, the poll shows Liberals have 38 per cent support among decided voters, with the Conservatives at 30.4, the NDP at 18 and the Bloc Québécois at 10.7. (The poll, conducted by EKOS Research Associates in 1,306 telephone interviews last week, is considered accurate within 2.7 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.)

Ontario's importance in the campaign is underlined by plans for Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, 44, to

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concentrate his tour solely in the province this week. Prime Minister Paul Martin, on the other hand, is making only a stop or two in Ontario this week. NDP Leader Jack Layton, 53, spent yesterday in Toronto and will be back to do more campaigning this week.

Anger over the recent Ontario budget may be the reason Martin, 65, is waiting to do any concerted campaigning over several days in the province where his party now holds all but a few seats, but where some observers are starting to predict the Liberals could lose at least a couple dozen of the 106 ridings up for grabs.

Liberal organizers and workers on the ground in Toronto say that some candidates have decided in recent days to ease up on the door-to-door campaigning in the hope that some of the anger of the budget will dissipate in a week or so. Several Liberal incumbents running for re-election in Ontario reported yesterday that Premier Dalton McGuinty's broken promise on tax increases was a big issue at the doorstep when they were out campaigning this weekend.

Officially, Liberal spokespersons are saying their hopes remain buoyant.

"We are confident that when Canadians are asked which prime minister they want, they will choose Paul Martin with a comfortable majority government," Steven MacKinnon, communications director for the federal party, said yesterday when asked about Tobin's remarks.

But off the record, candidates and party workers say they are not sensing any great affection for Liberals among the public and there is some grumbling that the campaign organization, dominated by die-hard Martin supporters, is too blinded by long-time loyalty to the leader to contemplate anything but the rosiest scenarios.

The real prospect of minority government could radically change the dynamic of the campaign, as voters start to look less at what divides the political parties and more to areas where they would form alliances or coalitions. All the political leaders could face tough questions about which one of their platform positions represented bottom-line conditions for co-operation with other parties.

It also heightens scrutiny of the smaller parties, such as the Bloc Québécois and the NDP, who could well hold the balance of power in any situation where neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives won more than 154 seats.

A Liberal minority would be widely expected to form common cause with the NDP, while the Conservatives, popular speculation has it, would have to consider an alliance with the sovereigntist Bloc.

MacKay wouldn't rule that out yesterday, though he acknowledged there would be problems. "I think it's difficult to say how long we could work with the Bloc or any other party depending on the issue, but we'll cross that bridge, as they say, when we get there."

It is true that beyond some loose agreement about the need for strong provincial powers in the federation, there is not much else that unites the Conservatives and the Bloc, and most political observers question how long that coalition could last. Deep divisions on social or international issues could blow apart any Tory-Bloc pact, especially when it came to same-sex marriage or relations with the United States.

While the Conservatives represent a strong constituency outside Quebec that opposes same-sex marriage and favours closer ties with Americans, the Bloc has been a champion of liberalized rights and the overwhelming Quebec constituency that favoured keeping Canada out of the U.S.-led war on Iraq.

Very privately, some Conservatives say they would prefer a short-lived Liberal minority to allow themselves more time to prepare for a government that looks a lot more possible now than it did just a few months ago, when Martin and his Liberals seemed unstoppable.

The Liberals held 168 seats in the House of Commons when Martin called the election on May 23. The Conservatives held 72, the Bloc 33, and the NDP 14.

There were 10 independents and four vacancies.

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