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Tories to stoke fear of opposition coalition

By Steven Chase and Campbell Clark
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Election strategy will feature attack on Liberal propensity for making deals with 'socialists and separatists'

Stephen Harper's Conservatives have decided their election strategy will rely in part on reviving the ghosts of last December.

The fleeting, four-day coalition that opposition parties formed in late 2008 to unseat Mr. Harper's Conservatives was deeply unpopular outside Quebec. The Tories plan to resurrect its fading memory to rattle voters, warning that backing opposition parties will bring instability.

This strategy is also the reason that Mr. Harper will not make a deal with the NDP or Bloc Québécois to avert an all but inevitable election.

He is gearing up to attack the Liberal propensity for making deals with "socialists and separatists" - as the party did last December - and Mr. Harper would be unravelling his own campaign plans if he struck an accord with the NDP or Bloc.

Conservative strategists want to remind their base, and swing voters, of the alliance the Liberals forged with the NDP and Bloc - and frighten them with the notion Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff might try it again. The accusation plays right into existing Tory attacks that paint the recently installed Liberal chief as a political carpetbagger who's returned to Canada after a long absence merely to win power.

"They can tie the two together and say ... 'He will force an election even when there is no reason for it and there is no policy distance between the two parties on any major issues. And he's forced an election which will lead to him rebuilding the deal with the other two parties,'" said University of Calgary political scientist Tom Flanagan, a former Harper adviser.

"It doesn't have to be true. It just has to be plausible and it strikes me as plausible."

The anti-coalition campaign strategy is also an argument in favour of a Tory majority because it paints this outcome as the only way to avoid the risk of another alliance between the Liberals, NDP and separatist Bloc Québécois.

The Conservatives are toying with how much weight to give two different themes for their election strategy: running against the threat of a coalition and campaigning as the party to protect Canadians from tax hikes as the country digs out of deficit.

Running full-bore against a coalition, however, is a high-risk strategy.

Most Canadians, especially swing voters, have all but forgotten the coalition's brief existence, said pollster Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Group.

Reviving it as a bogeyman for ordinary Canadians would probably backfire in Quebec, so the Tories would risk losing their 10 seats in the province.

To resurrect memory of the coalition, the Tories would need to again vilify the role of the separatist Bloc - the aspect of the December deal that angered many Canadians. But Quebecers resented Mr. Harper's attacks on the Bloc's role, and Tory support plummeted in the province.

"What made the coalition radioactive for about five days in December was the idea that the separatists were going to get to call the shots in Canada," Mr. Lyle said.

"But it was a moment. It was there and it was gone for the average voter. So to re-awaken that, basically means giving up on Quebec. But it is potentially emotional enough to push them over the majority finish line."

The strategy's effectiveness lies more in its ability to spur Conservative supporters to head to the polls to vote than it does in converting swing voters to the Tories, he said. Most swing voters barely recall the coalition - but its memory still pushes Conservatives' buttons.

And now that Canadian elections have low turnouts like U.S. campaigns, a get-out-your-vote strategy can win an election in Canada, much as it did for the American Republicans in 2000 and 2004.

"With turnout down to 50 per cent, it is now arguably a better strategy to mobilize your voters and de-mobilize the other guy's voters than it is to pitch for swing voters," Mr. Lyle said. "Things like the coalition get the base going."

The Conservatives also have another possible major theme: running as the party that won't raise taxes as the country digs out of deficit. It means turning one of the biggest challenges of the next decade, the deficit, into an argument for Tory rule.

In a struggling economy, Canadians are looking for a party to talk to them about their pocketbook, Mr. Lyle said. The Conservatives are always rated hands down as the best party to keep taxes low, and Mr. Ignatieff has given them ammunition by musing in April that his Liberals cannot rule out raising taxes to trim a deficit that now tops \$50-billion.

Prof. Flanagan said while he thinks the anti-coalition message is a risky venture, he believes it will play a dominant role in the next election

"I think the coalition theme will come to override all others by the end."

He said it would likely make sense to wrap up the campaign with a major appeal that warns the Liberals can't be trusted not to ally with the Bloc and NDP if the election produces another minority Parliament.

"I would be arguing for saving the big barrage until the final week," he said. "To me it looks like a good closer: 'Don't let the coalition come back.' I would raise it during the campaign ... and then really hammer it during the final week," Prof. Flanagan said.

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