

Challenges for Trudeau Grits

EDITORIAL

What may be the final session of Parliament before next year's federal election got off to a rocky start Monday for the Liberal government when it lost one of its backbenchers to the Official Opposition Conservatives.

The move by Leona Alleslev, the first-term MP for Aurora - Oak Ridges - Richmond Hill, was a coup for the opposition Tories, who are counting on a breakthrough in suburban Toronto-area ridings like hers to win them the election, now just 13 months away.

On Monday, she explained her action by saying the Liberals have not adequately addressed some 'foundational challenges' facing Canada, citing the government's handling of the economy, tax reform, foreign affairs and trading relationships, and what she called inadequate military spending.

We suspect her main concern as a graduate of the Royal Military College and a former captain in the Royal Canadian Air Force was with the military budget.

That could explain Tory leader Andrew Scheer's decision to immediately name her as the party's critic 'for global security'.

Whatever the case, her defection may well turn out to be one of the Liberals' least concerns as election day approaches. It will certainly be of far less consequence than the state of the economy, joblessness, the Trans Mountain pipeline and the government's success or failure in the seemingly endless North American free trade (NAFTA) negotiations.

Only a few months ago, the Trudeau government's chances of winning a second four-year term seemed solid, and more recently were aided by Maxime Bernier's decision to leave the Tories and form what he now calls the People's Party of Canada.

Also on the plus side for the Grits was the languishing support for the New Democrats, attributable to some extent to the fact its leader, Jagmeet Singh, has not had a seat in the Commons.

Recent polls show the NDP as having just 15 per cent support in the electorate, and it will likely be several months before Mr. Singh can manage a byelection win as NDP candidate in B.C.'s Burnaby South riding, which was narrowly won in 2015 by the party's Kennedy Stewart, who spent nearly \$178,000 on his campaign, far more than his Liberal, Conservative, Green and Libertarian opponents combined.

As so recently shown in the Ontario election, the centrist Liberals tend to have support that's broad but terribly shallow.

They wound up with about 20 per cent of the votes but only seven seats in the Legislature despite one pre-election poll showing that 49 per cent of eligible voters who intended to vote for another party listed them as their second choice.

Occupying the middle of the road is always a tough challenge, and more so in these days when populists like Donald Trump and Doug Ford can seemingly rely on the social media to propel them to victory over serious opponents.

Thus far, populism hasn't played much of a role in our federal politics, but it's interesting to see the extent to which federal and provincial Conservatives have been campaigning against any form of carbon pricing, denouncing it as just another form of taxation even when its proponents (including the NDP and Greens) see it as an essential means of combating human-induced climate change.

It leaves some of us wondering what weapon, if anything, the right-wing critics would use, or whether they might just join with Donald Trump in denying the existence of greenhouse gases.

However, the first and biggest challenge for the current government is obviously NAFTA.

In view of the bullying tactics of the Trump administration it's likely impossible for Canada to secure anything resembling a victory and the best hope is for a face-saving agreement that allows more U.S. dairy products into Canada and refers disputes to an international panel only as a final appeal from domestic courts.