

Harper to put government on line

Tories are readying a confidence motion over extending Canada's role, PM says

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper is prepared to put his minority government on the line over the future of the Afghanistan mission after he warned Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion that the Tories are preparing a confidence motion that could be voted on as early as next week.

A source told The Globe and Mail that the government is prepared to give notice tomorrow of the motion that Canada's role be extended. If the government were to lose, it could plunge the country into an election.

Mr. Harper issued the warning during a 25-minute meeting between the two men yesterday to discuss the future of the Afghan mission and a possible compromise over Canada's presence in the strife-torn province of Kandahar.

The Liberals are divided on the issue, but Mr. Dion has said that he will whip the vote, meaning the party must vote as one. The NDP and the Bloc Québécois are already against the mission, demanding that it end by 2009. The Liberals, however, have said there may be room for some compromise.

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However, Mr. Dion has told Mr. Harper that he won't budge from his condition that any Canadian role in Afghanistan after 2009 not include a combat function.

Mr. Dion laid out the position as he and Mr. Harper discussed ways for Canada to move forward in warring country after its mission ends in 2009. The two men got together for 25 minutes in a meeting aimed at finding common ground on a report from the panel led by former foreign affairs minister John Manley, which suggests that Canada leave Kandahar in 2009 if NATO doesn't provide another 1,000 troops, helicopters and unmanned aircraft.

"Mr. Dion made clear the Liberal Party's long-standing position on the mission in Afghanistan, including our firm and unwavering belief

that the combat mission in Kandahar must end by February, 2009," said a statement released by Mr. Dion after the meeting ended late yesterday afternoon.

Mr. Dion would release no further details yesterday. The Tories support the Manley proposal and need the backing of the Liberals to push ahead with continued Canadian presence in Kandahar. It's unclear whether Mr. Dion offered a compromise. His officials said yesterday that the leader plans to discuss the issue with his caucus today.

"The Prime Minister reiterated the government's position - that we are adopting the bi-partisan recommendations of the Manley panel - and that if we are unable to secure extra combat troops and equipment, Canada will not be extending the mission in Afghanistan," said a statement from the Prime Minister's Office.

A source with knowledge of the meeting said last night that the two sides seemed fairly entrenched in their positions.

The British newspaper The Guardian reported yesterday that France may increase its military presence in Afghanistan.

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