

Minority government's life in hazard once budget presented to Commons



By
Peter
Desbarats

OTTAWA — Like an army committing itself to battle, fearful but with a sense of relief that the waiting is over, the Trudeau minority government has named Feb. 19 as "zero hour" for the presentation of its budget and the beginning of its third and most critical parliamentary phase.

Finance Minister Turner's announcement of a budget date ended an unreal month in Ottawa. From the opening of the session on Jan. 4, the defeat of the minority government was always possible but never probable.

While the Conservative Opposition called daily for an overthrow of the government in the House, party organizers worked on the assumption that nothing was more unlikely.

Opinion check

The Conservatives carefully studied the results of the most comprehensive post-election opinion survey ever undertaken by a political party in Canada. In Quebec, where the party will make a major effort in the next campaign, provincial organizers were given until March 1 to present their plans for the future to the federal party.

Before the session began, the New Democratic Party was looking past the Throne Speech debate toward the budget as its first real time of decision. Most of its energies, since then, have been devoted to warding off Conservative insinuations about what NDP Leader Lewis prefers to call his party's "gentle courtship" of the minority government.

Even the government has labored under a sense of anticlimax. Prime Minister Trudeau has bided his time in the Commons, letting his new junior ministers test their wits against the new members of the Conservative front bench.

Slow going

During this "phoney war" period in the House, the critical area was inter-party communication.

It became clear that the government's long-term future would depend on its ability to survive debate on the budget, and this ability would depend to a great extent on the quality of communication between the government and the NDP.

All the evidence indicates, up to now, that this communication has been slow to establish itself.

Apart from Justice Minister Lang's highly publicized chat with Lewis after the election, contacts between the Liberal government and the NDP were infrequent and low-level from between the election to the opening of Parliament.

A few days after the Throne Speech, a senior member of the cabinet confided that this lack of contact with the NDP had made him revise his own estimate of the government's life expectancy in the House to less than four months.

He said that "linkages are now being formed" between the two parties at various levels because it was imperative for the government to know, among other things, the actual level of discontent in the NDP with the strategy that Lewis was adopting in the House.

In mid-January, a senior official of the Liberal Party claimed that the two parties were still operating at arm's length "to a remarkable degree."

"It's a bit eerie," he said. "We've actually had to read the NDP press releases to find out what they're likely to do."

Haven't learned

This was confirmed in the last week in January when one of the new members of the cabinet talked about this situation in critical terms.

He said that it was unfortunate that Canadians had failed to learn the proper management of minority Parliaments. Business-like arrangements between parties for the effective government of the country, he said, should be treated as a matter of course.

It became apparent, about this time, that a great deal of informal communication was taking place between the two groups and, in particular, between some of the newer members of the cabinet and NDP members whom they regarded as being realistic rather than doctrinate.

At the beginning of February, one of the NDP members related a conversation between himself and govern-



BRYCE MACKASEY
He got message to NDP

ment House leader MacEachen in which he had "given MacEachen my assessment of the party position on certain things, including the budget."

About the same time, a member of the Liberal cabinet indicated that this type of contact was strengthening the hand of "the progressive group" in the cabinet.

But there also were signs that these contacts were not always effective.

They didn't prevent the government from blundering into the House with amendments to the Unemployment Insurance scheme that were unacceptable to the NDP. This put the government into the position of having to be "advised" — to use the favorite term of Knowles of the NDP — of specific NDP objections to the bill in the House and from the public platform.

Only last week, NDP Leader Lewis was still spelling out his party's specific objections to the bill in a speech in Toronto.

Mackasey replies

And former Labor Minister Mackasey was using a debate in the House to communicate the government's response to the NDP — that the bill should go to committee before second reading so that everyone could have another look at it.

The government's credibility can't stand a great deal of this type of public negotiation with the third party in the House. It certainly isn't an adequate mechanism to prevent trouble on the budget.

The possibility of a defeat of the government on the budget is clearly apparent.

The government is committed to reintroducing the

manufacturing incentives proposed in the previous budget. Discussing this legislation after the election, Finance Minister Turner has insisted on "our will to stand firm on a critical issue." Lewis this week again "made it clear that we will oppose any further corporate rip-off."

As the government faces this dilemma, the division between "left" and "right" in the Liberal Party has been accentuated, with the left

element in the cabinet strengthened by the new ministers and with Finance Minister Turner strongly identified with the opposite side.

Finance ministers always move into the limelight at budget time but Turner's role this year is even more pivotal than usual, both for the government and his own career.

The question of leadership is a whisper on the wind among Liberals these days.