

Tories' motion to offer Liberals a compromise on Afghanistan

Troops would withdraw in 2011, sources say

CAMPBELL CLARK

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OTTAWA — The Conservative minority government will move Thursday to unveil a new motion on extending the mission in Afghanistan in a bid to close a compromise deal with the opposition Liberals that would allow Canadian soldiers to stay another two years, sources say.

The new motion is expected to spell out more clearly that the government intends to end the mission in Kandahar in 2011, and include some efforts to bridge Liberal demands – but the details may be key to a deal.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper is expected to outline the new proposal in a speech Thursday to the Conference of Defence Associations in Ottawa. The government has set two days for debate on Afghanistan starting Monday, and the motion must be issued by Thursday.

A vote on Afghanistan is not expected until next month – although it would be delayed if the government is defeated on the budget to be tabled next week.

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Canada's continued presence in the dangerous mission in southern Afghanistan will turn on a parliamentary vote.

The Liberals, the only opposition party not demanding the mission end completely next year, have called for a change in the mission away from combat and toward security and training.

Setting a clear end date in 2011 is key to winning Liberal support for extending the mission past February, 2009 – and Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion has accused Mr. Harper of being unwilling to commit to such a firm exit date.

The government presented its first motion on extending the Afghan mission less than two weeks ago, in which it called for a review of the mission in 2011 – a phrase that some said could lead to further extension, rather than bringing the troops home.

They said the motion could be a matter of confidence when it is voted on next month, which could trigger an election.

However, Mr. Dion, seeking to keep his caucus of MPs united and avoid fighting an election campaign on the Afghan war, offered a compromise that would see an extended mission given a new mandate after 2009 – but he conceded that the generals, not politicians, would decide what fighting is necessary.

The Liberals have also demanded a series of other concessions, including regular parliamentary reports on the progress of the mission, a NATO agreement on the treatment of prisoners, and a broadening of aid and reconstruction efforts.

The Conservatives have said that they will only extend the mission if NATO provides 1,000 troops as reinforcements, and help in obtaining helicopters and aerial drones, as recommended by a panel headed by former Liberal minister John Manley.

But the Liberals say more troops might be needed – as replacements in the heavy combat role, rather than reinforcements.

With a report from Brian Laghi

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