

Fage incident complicates single-issue House session

By ALISON AULD The Canadian Press

It was the last thing Rodney MacDonald needed.

The Nova Scotia premier was hoping to head into a rare winter sitting today to deal with a single piece of legislation and turn people's attention away from a slew of political missteps that have left his popularity slipping steadily in the polls.

But when witnesses accused one of his senior cabinet ministers of leaving the scene of a collision with alcohol on his breath, the Tory leader must have despaired that the legislative session he called would be overshadowed by a fresh scandal.

"It's very damaging," pollster Don Mills of Corporate Research Associates Inc. said in an interview.

"Just when they seemed to have a little stability in their government, to have this happen to them is very damaging."

Pundits are mixed over just what the fallout will be from Ernie Fage's resignation as human resources minister last week, after the release of grainy cellphone images showing him fleeing the scene of the accident on Nov. 24.

Fage has not been charged and none of the allegations have been proven. The minister has refused to comment about the specifics of the accident while police investigate.

Mills said the incident will only tarnish the ruling Conservatives' already sullied image and make voters again question their judgment, particularly since this is the second time Fage has stepped down in a year because of a perceived ethical lapse.

MacDonald brought the rural minister back into cabinet last year after Fage quit over a controversial loan linked to a seed-potato farm that leased land from his family.

"It's not going to help their popularity, for sure," said Mills. "It's one of those incidents that most people will say showed incredibly bad judgment."

"And it obviously reflects back to the government in general."

The incident also raises questions about the future of the Liberals' support for the minority government, which has been propped up by the third-place party since pulling off a slim victory in last summer's election.

It might not become much clearer today when all parties return to the legislature to debate a bill on campaign finance reform that MacDonald felt was so pressing he recalled the house just weeks after the fall session ended.

Interim Liberal leader Michel Samson would only say that "everything's on the table" as the party meets Monday to consider its options and await further information from the premier as to what happened the night of the accident.

But it's unlikely the Liberals would move to topple the government. They will be without a leader until their convention at the end of April, and observers say they're likely not ready financially to head to the polls.

To bring down the government, the opposition would need to wait until a confidence motion. At the earliest, that would likely be in the spring when the Tories are expected to bring in a budget.

Samson hasn't yet indicated how his party plans to vote on this year's budget, while the NDP has said it has to see the financial plan before deciding whether to support it.

Some analysts suggest the Fage incident might have little lasting effect and that the dynamic in the house will remain almost unchanged.

"Frankly, I see it doing virtually nothing," said Michael MacMillan, a professor of political science at Mount St. Vincent University.

"I think we're going to see pretty much more of the same. The NDP is the government in waiting and will be busy showing they're more than ready to assume government position. The Liberals are keen to avoid an election until they're able to put a better foot forward, so they're going to be supporting the government as much as possible."

It's expected the Liberals will continue to support the Tories when they vote on the campaign finance reform bill, which would cap donations to political parties from companies and unions at \$5,000 per contribution. The New Democrats want the donations banned entirely, which is the case at the federal level.

Still, MacMillan said the Fage incident could stick with voters still smarting over the Tories' decision to reverse party policy and implement gas-price regulation, allow Sunday shopping and appoint MacDonald's former chief of staff to a new energy agency.

"MacDonald has underperformed and underwhelmed and that is a widely shared perception in the province," he said.

"This is one more bit of bad news — it's not a particularly big element of bad news, but it is part of a pattern that is there."