

Canada fears loss in UN Security Council race

CTV News (featuring Colin Robertson)
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OTTAWA — The Harper government is bracing for what would be an embarrassing loss in its bid to win a temporary seat on the United Nations Security Council, The Canadian Press has learned.

Canada could lose to Germany in the first round of voting, and might not win a tough fight on a second ballot against Portugal, say government sources.

The three countries are vying for two temporary, two-year seats on the UN's most powerful decision-making body.

Faced with this tough battle, the government has banned all substantive on-the-record discussion by its officials on the hotly contested race that will be decided on Oct. 12 when the UN's 192 ambassadors cast a secret vote.

In interviews, some senior government officials discussed Canada's prospects, on the condition of anonymity.

They spoke as Prime Minister Stephen Harper was to deliver his second address in five years to the UN General Assembly on Thursday in what is seen as key moment in the campaign.

One senior official said this week Canada is expecting to lose to Germany on a first ballot.

And while many observers have pegged Canada as an easy favourite to beat Portugal for the second seat, the official said he is worried that won't happen.

Another senior official said the government has adopted a strategy to deliberately play down the race.

"We don't want to talk on the record about all this. We're not going to 'up-play' this. It's great if it happens. But it's so complex. We'll see what happens," the official said.

The official acknowledged Germany is a formidable foe, and that Canada expects its Western European rival to spare no expense in courting support in New York's diplomatic circles in the coming weeks.

But Canada won't be trying to compete with its own expensive, lavish parties, the official added.

"It's less our style in the economic downturn. At the end of the day, we're not conducting our foreign affairs to be part of a council. We're conducting our foreign affairs based on the values Canadians embrace."

Canada's last two-year term ended in 2000, following a pattern of one such term roughly every decade dating to the late 1940s. If the worst fears of Canadian officials do materialize, it will mark the country's longest absence from the council.

Germany's last term ended in 2004. A senior German diplomat said in an interview that his government has a policy of seeking a council seat every six years.

"To put it very bluntly, it is very sexy to be on the Security Council. Your advice is sought and you're being asked and told things that are not usually forthcoming," said the diplomat.

Predicting the outcome of a UN campaign is next to impossible. There are no horse-race polls like in a domestic political election, and much of the politicking is done behind the scenes in private meetings.

Even Harper's chief spokesman, Dimitri Soudas, was reluctant to discuss the specifics of the Security Council campaign during a briefing last week about the prime minister's trip to the UN.

"I'm actually told I'm not allowed to comment on campaign strategy," Soudas said as he was flanked by four other senior government officials -- none of whom could be quoted by name under the rules of a pre-trip briefing.

One of those officials bristled when asked whether Canada had meetings planned with blocs of countries that could decide the race -- such as the Arab League and the African Union, which may object to some of the Harper government's foreign policy.

"We're in the middle of a campaign against two other competitors for two seats. ... We aren't going to be sharing information until the actual vote date on Oct. 12," he said.

"Who we see, and who we don't see and who we talk to is part of the campaign process that we keep pretty close to ourselves."

Another official in the briefing was also guarded about Canada's chances. "We're working extremely hard at it, and we have good support, but we'll have to see."

One seasoned international observer says it is silly to expect Canada will come up short next month, arguing that Portugal's recent economic performance will be an impediment.

"The Portuguese have got some big problems," said Colin Robertson, a retired diplomat and research fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. "Do you really want that many Europeans on the Security Council?"

Canada's perceived pro-Israel tilt in the Middle East, or complaints that it has been inattentive to Africa, won't hurt next month, he said.

Harper's growing stature as international statesman, Canada's recent record hosting the G8 and G20 summits, as well as the Olympics, will ultimately win votes at the UN, said Robertson.

"He's five years in the ring as prime minister. He's now seen three Japanese prime ministers. He's now seasoned," said Robertson.

"We'll be judged on our Canadian reputation and our record. The Canadian record is a good record, notwithstanding the domestic critics."

Soudas had few specifics about what Harper's speech would offer on Thursday, but did say the prime minister would stress "accountability and transparency in the UN system."

Asked why Canada wanted to be on Security Council, Soudas cited the G8 and G20 summits, the country's record in Afghanistan and Haiti, as well as the tough line it has taken against Iran and North Korea.

Soudas said 2010 was a year that allowed Canada "to showcase its international leadership."

"One way or the other, regardless of the result at the UN Security Council in October, our foreign policy, our economic leadership towards helping those in developing countries that are the most in need will continue to shine."