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## news

### Libs paint PM out of picture

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Article from:

Sunday Mail

GLENN MILNE

September 16, 2007 12:15am

**THE election is increasingly likely to be held in late October or early November as Liberal MPs begin airbrushing John Howard out of their local campaigns after the damaging leadership chaos of the past week.**

Senior Liberals yesterday insisted the election was likely to be "sooner" rather than dragged out to December, despite the Prime Minister technically leaving this window open.

The sources ruled out any visit by Mr Howard to the Governor-General today to start the campaign despite some speculation in Canberra. They said Parliament would sit this week and after that senior Government figures would sit down with pollster Mark Textor, campaign director Brian Loughnane and Mr Howard to set the poll date.

The sources denied claims circulating within the Government that Mr Loughnane and Cabinet ministers, including Alexander Downer, were in favour of pushing the election out, while Mr Howard was keen to go earlier.

It's understood Mr Downer, the Foreign Affairs Minister, has privately canvassed the option of going to the polls as late as December on the basis that the longer Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd is exposed the more likely he will be to make a major mistake.

For his part, Mr Howard will be anxious to avoid another series of bad opinion polls of the sort which seriously destabilised his leadership this week. That saw most of Cabinet decide he should stand aside in favour of Peter Costello, then back away from insisting the Prime Minister quit the top job.

The case for a later election has strengthened following leaked results from Labor focus groups immediately after Mr Howard's decision to "share" the leadership with Peter Costello, while flagging he will retire some time next term if he wins.

According to senior Labor figures, groups of voters surveyed in Adelaide and Sydney gave the thumbs down

to Mr Howard's retirement and succession plans. Their views helped script Labor's rapid-response television advertisements this week, highlighting the Government's confusion about who was leading it and where it was headed.

Liberal MPs and candidates, aghast at the damage done to the Government's re-election chances by the Prime Minister's blundering this week, have begun to devise campaigns minimising his profile – in stark contrast to previous polls where Mr Howard's profile was regarded as a positive. "Candidates are starting to put together campaigns which stress their local credentials rather than any presidential-style campaign," a frontbencher said.

"We're not going to want Howard anywhere near our seats during the campaign. Don't expect to see many pictures of him around voting booths on polling day, either."

Meanwhile, on the day Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd launched his campaign slogan, Mr Howard toured a Sydney shopping centre and posed for photographs, shook hands, hugged and even kissed constituents for more than an hour-and-a-half.

"If I am returned and the Government is returned in the coming election, I will serve as the member for Bennelong for the full term and I won't be inflicting a by-election on the people of my electorate," Mr Howard said.

Members of the religious sect The Exclusive Brethren showed their support, shaking hands and following his entourage. "We are right behind him," one female member said.

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Mr Howard at Carlingford Court shopping centre mingles with his electorate's constituents yesterday.

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