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## Politics



The caskets of the six fallen soldiers in an aircraft as they begin their journey back to Canada, April 10, 2007, at Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan. (CP / DND/ Sgt Roxanne Clowe)

### Afghan casualties could hurt Tories: pollster

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CTV.ca News Staff

If casualties there swing upward, the Afghanistan mission could provide a political liability for the governing Conservatives -- particularly in Quebec, says a pollster.

"The wild card is that this mission is seen to be very closely associated with the U.S., and that's bad political news for (Prime Minister) Stephen Harper," Nick Nanos of SES Research told CTV Newsnet's *Mike*



Nick Nanos of SES Research.

*Duffy Live* on Tuesday.

He said Conservative numbers generally tend to soften in Quebec when Afghanistan rises in prominence in the news.

With the Conservatives having tabled a well-received budget on March 19 and two politically friendly parties doing well in the March 26 Quebec provincial election, their fortunes are seen to be on the upswing in Quebec.

Canada's second-most populous province, with 75 federal seats, is a key piece of the Tories' electoral quest to form a majority government.

Ottawa has been aflame with speculation about the possibility of a spring election, given numerous Conservative government spending announcements and the party's attack ads aimed at Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion.

The Afghanistan situation has been working to the benefit of the Tories for most of 2007, with no combat-related deaths since Nov. 27, 2006.

That calm was shattered on Easter Sunday when a roadside bomb struck a LAV-III armoured vehicle in western Kandahar province, killing six of 10 Canadian soldiers inside.

"Although Quebecers like clean government, the trust and confidence that Stephen Harper projects, when they see a prime minister that's very closely aligned with the Americans, they start to get a little nervous," Nanos said.



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"And I think if they see casualties on a mission that's perceived to be closely aligned with George Bush, that could be bad news for Stephen Harper."

While Quebecers have supported close economic ties with the U.S., but on foreign policy, "they want to see Canada chart its own course, a course separate from the United States ... and that's when it becomes very tricky for the Conservatives," Nanos said.

### The Van Doos

The Van Doos are the storied regiment based in Val Cartier, Quebec.

They have not yet been deployed to Afghanistan as a battle group, although they are scheduled to ship out in August.

"I was surprised by it," Col. (ret'd) Michel Drapeau, a military analyst, told MDL.




"Either they weren't ready for it, or it could simply be a political decision for whatever reason one could imagine for it."

He thought if the regiment did suffer casualties, "there would be a heightened degree of sensitivity to the loss, perhaps that may translate itself into more opposition to the government for extending the mission."

The Conservatives spearheaded a motion last year to extend the Canadian mission in Afghanistan's Kandahar province until February 2009. The Liberals were fractured in support of it, and the NDP and Bloc Quebecois opposed it.

Stephen Staples, a defence analyst with the Polaris Institute, said Quebec doesn't necessarily go against the grain of Canada, "but the feelings are more pronounced."

He didn't think casualty reports changed peoples' opinions so much as hardened them.

-  Mike Duffy Live: Nick Nanos, SES Research 6:39
-  Mike Duffy Live: Experts on the politics of procurement 6:20
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