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Tue, July 31, 2007

2007 Summer Swimsuit Edition
NEW

New ailment strikes leaders

By NIK NANOS

E-MAIL TO A FRIEND PRINT PAGE WRITE US LETTER TO THE EDITOR

There's a new ailment to add to our Canadian political dictionary -- it's called "newleaderitis." Not usually lethal, but quite the political inconvenience.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper had a minor bout of it, but managed to defy the conventional wisdom and the naysayers.

No one thought a former Reformer from Alberta could win seats in Quebec, let alone unseat what seemed like the unbeatable Liberals -- but he did.

Liberal Leader Stephan Dion is having his own case of newleaderitis. Having snatched the Liberal leadership from front runners Michael Ignatieff and Bob Rae, he seemed poised to rekindle Liberal fortunes.

According to the SES Research tracking, the 10-point Tory lead in May 2006 melted away to a statistical tie on the eve of the Liberal leadership.

The Liberal convention should have been a launching pad for Dion.

What happened? Quite simply, Dion went underground in December and the Harper Tories went on the attack -- no honeymoon, no launch, no momentum. Love them or hate them, the Tory ads targeting Stephane Dion nipped a potential Liberal surge in the bud.

Indeed, by the spring of 2007, they had been so successful that Dion trailed Harper by a resounding 25 points on the best prime

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minister measure.

Of greater concern for the Grits is that, in his home province of Quebec, Dion trailed Harper by 33 points with only 10% of Quebecers giving the nod to their native son.

PRETTY GRIM

How bad was it? When the Liberal leader trails an Albertan Tory, a Toronto NDPer and a separatist on the best PM measure -- it has to be pretty grim.

Looking forward, things may not seem as gloomy for Stephane Dion.

First, his accord with Green Party Leader Elizabeth May has laid the groundwork for strategic voting growth for the Liberals. May has effectively endorsed Dion as a "safe haven" for those leaning Green to cast their ballot strategically for the Liberals to block the Tories. Research shows Green Party voters to be quite principled, but soft in their support. In the ballot box, with a local Green win as a remote possibility, those principled soft-Green voters could tick the Liberal option. At 10% nationally, a marginal swing from the Greens to the Liberals could have an impact in tight races in Ontario and British Columbia.

Second, one should not underestimate the resiliency of the Liberal brand. In theory the Liberals should have been trounced in the last federal election. Led by a leader who had not met expectations, tired after almost 15 years of power and rocked to its core because of the sponsorship scandal, the Liberals still managed to deny the Tories anything close to a majority government.

Finally, expectations for Stephane Dion are so low that anything resembling a political pulse will likely be touted as Liberal momentum and rejuvenation.

The Achilles heel for Stephane Dion is still Quebec. Although he does not have to carry his home province, he does have to improve his personal numbers. Like Harper, Dion mathematically needs more seats in Quebec to form a government. The polling shows Quebec as the province with the greatest volatility -- and volatility means political opportunity.

Pollster Nik Nanosis the president of SES Research

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