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A loud warning shot

Canadians losing their stomach for a war many see as futile will be bad news for Harper in an election

By **GREG WESTON**

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OTTAWA -- If a federal election were underway today, Afghanistan would almost certainly be a major battleground of the campaign, and could easily become a political killing field for Stephen Harper and the Conservatives.

That is the overwhelming political message of the exclusive SES Research-Sun Media poll taken over the past 10 days and released today.

For the Conservative minority government, the survey should be a loud warning shot that public support for Canada's continuing military role in the Afghan conflict is going south, and could head into full retreat in the face of mounting casualties among our troops.

Nowhere is the Afghanistan war more unpopular than in Quebec, the seat-rich province that Harper has consistently tried to court as the key to a Conservative majority government.

Among Quebecers polled by SES, 56% said Canada should pull out of Afghanistan if the death toll among our troops keeps rising, anti-war sentiments certain to intensify after troops of the Van Doos regiment from that province are deployed to Kandahar later this summer.

As for the opposition Liberals, New Democrats and Bloc Quebecois, the shifting public opinion is bound to bolster their calls for a Canadian withdrawal from Afghanistan.

SES pollster Nik Nanos says the survey suggests public opinion on Afghanistan could put the

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Conservatives' quest for a majority squarely in the crosshairs of an election campaign.

"The message could be, 'If you are uncomfortable with Afghanistan, do you really want to give Stephen Harper and the Conservatives a majority mandate to run the war?'"

The SES-Sun Media survey is both timely and revealing.

Since the first Canadian soldiers arrived in Afghanistan post 9/11, opinion in this country has remained pretty well evenly divided on the basic question of whether people are for or against Canada's involvement in the war.

But for the first time, the SES-Sun Media survey attempted to probe more deeply into our apparent national ambivalence over the Afghan conflict.

The good news for the Conservatives is that public opinion outside Quebec is about evenly split on how well the Harper government is managing the war.

As Nanos says: "Most people recognize this is a difficult mission that is going to be very difficult to win ... (and that) the Conservatives are just trying to make the best of a fundamentally tough issue."

But that's where the benevolence of Canadian opinion ends. The rest of the numbers in the SES-Sun Media survey should make heads spin in the political backrooms of all parties.

The fact that 55% of those polled said Canada should get out if casualties continue - - and, sadly, they will -- says Canadians are losing their stomach for a war that many see as increasingly futile.

As it happens, many of the voters the Conservatives would most like to attract, and would need to form a majority government in the next election -- women, Quebecers, soft Liberals -- are among those whose opposition to the war is most heavily influenced by the so-called body-bag syndrome.

Even among Harper's most cherished base of Conservative supporters, a stunning 40% think the Afghanistan conflict isn't worth losing a lot more Canadian lives.

Another key poll finding is that 67% think the mission is making this country and its citizens more vulnerable to a terrorist attack.

FIGHT AGAINST TERROR

This suggests the primary justification for deploying Canadian troops to Afghanistan -- taking the fight against terrorism to the terrorists -- is wearing thin with an increasingly skeptical public.

Perhaps more than anything, the SES-Sun Media poll reveals the depth of Quebecers, antipathy towards the Afghan war, and certainly helps to explain the sliding popularity of Harper's government in that province in the wake of the recent controversy over Afghan detainees.

As pollster Nanos says, regardless of the substance of the issue, whenever Afghanistan is in the news in Quebec, it is bad news for the Conservatives.

Really bad. The percentage of voters who favour pulling out of Afghanistan if casualties continue to mount is highest in Quebec.

Ditto for the percentage of voters who disagree with the Conservative government's management of the Afghanistan mission -- nowhere is it higher than in Quebec.

Throwing more money, guns and tanks at the conflict isn't likely to change the views of most Quebecers, either.

"Canadians are truly torn on this issue," says Nanos. "There are some Canadians who support our troops, but not the mission. And there are others who think our participation in Afghanistan paints a big red target on us."

Either way, Afghanistan is looming ever larger as the Conservatives' worst nightmare.

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