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POSTED AT 11:36 AM EDT Monday, May 20

Harper gets chance to make mark

By ALLAN WOODS
Globe and Mail Update



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Stephen Harper has a lot of work to do if he hopes to rebuild the Canadian Alliance and present a strong alternative to Prime Minister Jean Chr tien and his entrenched Liberal government, a national poll suggests.

Despite Mr. Harper's overwhelming victory in last Monday's Calgary-Southwest by-election, which allows him to enter the House of Commons as Leader of the Official Opposition, his party's support among potential voters increased only 9 per cent since the Alliance leadership convention in March, the poll says.

More unsettling for him, though, is the likelihood that few undecided voters — those who do not identify with a particular party and are thus a target of pre-election propaganda — will turn to the Alliance.

Of 296 undecided voters polled, 7.4 per cent said they were more likely to vote for the Alliance and 5.7 per cent said they were less likely to support the western-based party since Mr. Harper took the reigns. The result is a 1.7-per-cent increase, a disappointing figure for a party looking to repair its unstable image.

"The fact is there has been no significant bump [in support] coming out of the Canadian Alliance leadership convention," said Nikita Nanos, managing director of SES Research, which conducted the survey.

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Okay, so you didn't win the Super 7. If you had, what's the first thing you would have treated yourself to?

☐ A super vacation

☐ A new car

☐ Quit my job

☐ A new house



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by Stephen Poloz,
EDC's Chief Economist

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"[It] was a missed communications opportunity. Combined with no post-leadership honeymoon, a poor performance in the House by Harper could stall the CA," Mr. Nanos told globeandmail.com.

The survey polled 1,000 voters last month and asked if they would be more likely or less likely to vote for Mr. Harper's party in the wake of the March leadership convention, or if the leadership change would have no impact. It is considered accurate within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

As Mr. Harper, 43, prepares for his first day in the Commons on Tuesday, all eyes are watching to see if he continues to shy away from the spotlight that his predecessor, Stockwell Day, melted under.

"Mr. Day's leadership was an unmitigated disaster ... not because of policy but because of his leadership," said Paul Nesbitt-Larking, a political scientist at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont.

So far, Mr. Harper's leadership has been "very competent," Mr. Nesbitt-Larking told globeandmail.com. "He's steered that ship with great skill."

Mr. Nesbitt-Larking pointed to Mr. Harper's handling of the by-election squabble with Ezra Levant, in which Mr. Levant originally refused to give up his seat to Mr. Harper, saying he had already spent \$200,000 on his campaign. Mr. Levant eventually deferred to the party leader.

"Does [Mr. Harper's] image need tweaking? Yes, quite a bit. But slowly," Mr. Nesbitt-Larking said.

Despite Mr. Harper's apparent deft political touch, he said, support for the western-based party is likely to remain low unless Mr. Harper can lead his crew back to the political centre and garner votes usually scooped up by the Liberals.

Because this is unlikely, observers say, the Liberal party will maintain power and continue fighting off their splintered opposition.

The poll noted that support for the Liberals rose 9 per cent from the 2000 federal election to 49 per cent, while Alliance support dropped 6.5 per cent to 19 per cent, less support than the party garnered in the 1997 election.

"It's like they take two steps forward and three steps back," Mr. Nanos said.

He said it will be important to see if Mr. Harper can avoid the pitfalls that befell the party under Mr. Day, particularly in regards to controlling the MPs apt to public gaffes.

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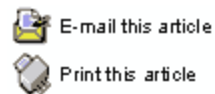
Don't you just hate it when you go to a foreign movie thinking that it's a saucy French coming-of-age flick, and it turns out to be a dour Danish hand-held-camera film about a dysfunctional family? -- Ron Charach, Toronto



"Whenever they make headway, someone says something stupid and it gets them off-message," he said.



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