

Why the Conservatives are doing so poorly

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FROM WEDNESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

The prevailing media narrative is wrong, and has been wrong for months. Sure, the Liberals are struggling: no leader, no policies, little money. That's the obvious narrative line.

The important one is the reverse: Why are the Conservatives doing so poorly?

They've had control of the agenda. They've been systematically implementing most of their campaign promises, starting with the famous five points (GST cut, the Accountability Act, etc.). Prime Minister Stephen Harper spent chunks of the summer travelling the country, not just shaking hands, but making announcements. The economy's rolling.

Parliament hasn't been in session since June. When Parliament shuts down, the opposition parties scarcely get face time on television. So to repeat: Why aren't the Conservatives doing much better?

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An SES poll (SES has been bang on the past two elections) last week gave the Conservatives 36 per cent of popular support, exactly their election score. The 10-point spread between Conservatives and Liberals in May had shrunk to 6, despite the Liberals' problems.

Decima Research, an excellent Ottawa-based firm, last week found the Conservatives at 33 per cent with the Liberals at 28.

A CROP poll in Quebec last week reported the Conservatives had fallen 9 points from June to August (to 24 per cent from 33 per cent), while the Bloc Québécois rose 6 points to 36 per cent, and the Liberals gained 4 points to 21 per cent.

Two conclusions leap out from these polls. First, the Conservatives are nowhere near what they would need for a majority government, despite Mr. Harper's fixation with achieving one. Second, they are stalled or going backwards where they need to find new voters: in Quebec and Ontario.

The Conservative vote is holding or rising where it was already strong, but not growing where it was too weak to win. Conservative core voters seem content enough; the rest are not. SES research

shows opponents of Mr. Harper are much more passionate in their opinions than are his supporters.

On the plus side, voters seem to like Mr. Harper's decisiveness, but only up to a point. When he seems to side instinctively and reflexively with U.S. policies, as he did in the Middle East, his supporters approve but the majority of Canadians disapproves. His Middle East position in Quebec, whatever its substantive merits, was a big political loser.

The apparent Conservative rectitude -- no scandals as yet -- and the memory of perceived Liberal corruption remains a Conservative strong point. They rode that message to a minority government -- a variation on the old "time for a change" sentiment -- and it still helps, although its political force wanes over time.

Canadians also like the idea that promises are being kept, even if they have only the foggiest idea of what they are, and even if some of them are crack-brained, which is presumably why Mr. Harper makes a constant point of underscoring how he is keeping them.

The Conservatives had been blindsided by the environment, or at least were themselves blind to the issue. As part of their touch-it, feel-it, vote-for-it populism, they treated the environment as smog and clear water, easily understood manifestations of pollution.

On climate change, they knew rather incoherently what they did not like -- the Kyoto accord -- but not what they wanted. The interest in the issue caught them by surprise.

That the Environment Minister's chief-of-staff and deputy minister were replaced, and that a PMO factotum has been assigned to work with Rona Ambrose on the file, means the government belatedly knew it needed something to put in the climate change window this fall. It's an especially important political file in Quebec.

Nothing on climate change, a pro-U.S. foreign policy, the prospect of another debate on same-sex marriage, a ready-aye-ready support for everything Israeli, no resolution of the mythical but widely believed "fiscal imbalance" -- these have all disappointed some Quebeckers who took a chance on the Conservatives. These policies haven't helped with swing voters elsewhere either.

That the Liberals are leaderless might help explain why the Conservatives are not doing better. Parties without a leader can be the repository of all imaginable hopes. A leader brings the party into focus. Every one in the Liberal race has considerable liabilities that the Conservatives will exploit.

The Conservatives had the field to themselves since the election, but they haven't moved the ball except sideways. That's the untold narrative of the government's first eight months.

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