

NEWS

Harper needs a 'government-in-waiting mindset': pollster

■ *SES pollster Nick Nanos says Stephen Harper's summer barbecue tour has been a failure, and urges the Tory Leader to focus on bread and butter issues such as taxes and the economy.*

By F. ABBAS RANA

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper should adopt a "government-in-waiting mindset" if he wants to close the widening popularity gap between his party and the governing Liberals, says Nik Nanos, president and CEO of SES Research whose most recent poll shows the Conservatives trailing 16 points behind the Liberals.

"The two key things that he'd have to do is break out of the opposition-mindset and into the mindset of being a government-in-waiting," he said, adding that the party must also focus more on economic issues which is what Canadians traditionally expect them to do.

"He should focus on the Conservative franchise, like focussing on issues that are really core issues for the Conservatives, such as taxes and the economy. For the average Canadian, those are the types of issues that they expect the Conservatives to be strong on and very vocal on but when they see the Conservatives on national child care and so forth, it's just not part of their core strength," he said.

According to SES Research's quarterly poll, released on Aug. 15, the Liberals were well ahead of the Conservatives by 16 points with the support of 39 per cent of Canadians. The Conservatives were at 25 per cent, while the NDP at 19 per cent.

Only 14 per cent of respondents said Mr. Harper would make the best prime minister, while 31 per cent picked Prime Minister Paul Martin (LaSalle-Émard, Que.). NDP Leader Jack Layton (Toronto-Danforth, Ont.) got 15 per cent support.

Mr. Nanos said that Mr. Harper's popularity dropped 13 per cent during the summer. This lost support didn't bleed to any other party leader, but rather made its way to the "none-of-the-above" category, said Mr. Nanos.

Mr. Nanos concluded Mr. Harper's summer tour, designed to boost his image, did not prove to be fruitful.

"When we see movement like that where people move from one particular preference to none, it means that that's driven by what that person is doing which means Paul Martin hasn't done anything to change his image, neither has Jack Layton but Harper, his activities in the last 90 days have basically moved people away from him into the none of the above," he said.

"We're looking at the best PM numbers, that's really more of a thermometer reading on the leaders, if I can use an example, back in 1987, Ed Broadbent was identified as the individual who people thought would make the best prime minister but that doesn't mean they'd vote for him."

Mr. Nanos added that the Conservative Leader should do more to spell out in his public appearances how he would lead a different government than the Liberals.

"He needs to better articulate how a Harper-led government would be different from the Liberals and if we could just use the example of the Governor General's recent appointment, although Harper has questioned the Prime Minister on this appointment, one issue that has not been dealt with is the fact that how would Harper be any different if he was Prime Minister. There's potentially an opportunity for him to talk about the process appointing a Governor General in order to show if he was prime minister, how will it be different but it's a missed opportunity."

Conservative commentators recently have been critical of Mr. Harper for failing to distinguish his party from the Liberals.

"As a number of issues have emerged, the Conservative party simply hasn't tried to sell its policies, and this hasn't served the taxpayers," Canadian Taxpayers Federation director John Williamson told *Ottawa Citizen* last week.

The Office of the Leader of the Opposition (OLO) however countered the criticism with a press release last Tuesday outlining policy announcements that Mr. Harper made during his summer tour, including "health care (a promise that all jurisdictions would be held responsible for meeting wait time reduction targets and a promise to examine a care guarantee that would ensure patients received treatment within the clinically acceptable waiting times), child care, the environment, and national unity, addressing the fiscal imbalance, and democratic reform, including proposals for an elected Senate."

On Wednesday, Mr. Harper called on the government to give tax relief to individuals and small businesses given that it's collecting higher than expected taxes due to high gas prices.

"This is an unexpected windfall for the government. The government did not budget for this revenue. It's making an enormous amount of money on the higher oil prices and we think the logical response is to lower the taxes," Mr. Harper told reporters in Nova Scotia.

Pollara pollster Michael Marzolini, who served as the official pollster of the Liberal Party of Canada under former party leader and prime minister Jean Chrétien, said that



Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

Under fire: Critics recently lined up en masse to accuse Conservative Leader Stephen Harper for failing to articulate a vision and platform that sets his party apart from the governing Liberals.

Mr. Harper is generally known to be a policy wonk and is not usually seen comfortable amongst people, so rather than touring the country in summer, he should be spending more time developing and talking about party policies.

"The key for a politician is to be comfortable in his own skin, to be natural. If Harper doesn't feel like glad-handing at the barbecue circuit, he certainly shouldn't be doing it, he should be spending time developing and introducing policy and putting an agenda, a plan on the table which is really what Canadians want. They want it from the opposition parties, they want it from the Liberal Party and they feel they've been shortchanged by both,"

said Mr. Marzolini.

Moreover, he said Mr. Harper should be showcasing the moderates in his party and members of his shadow cabinet to prove that he's a team player.

"He really has to put more in the window and may be emphasize the team, the economic expertise of people like Monte Solberg. I can't see a government here being formed by Stephen Harper until he says 'Well, look, guys like Monte Solberg could be my minister of finance, guys like Stockwell Day could be foreign affairs or trade or something and feature some of his team and take a team approach,'" he said.

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Defence

The Canadian military was one of the big winners in the Budget 2005 which included a \$12.8-billion shot in the arm over the next five years, the biggest increase in defence spending in two decades. The money will go to expand the Canadian Forces by 5,000 troops and the reserves by 3,000, to increase operating budgets and address critical supply shortages.

But does the Liberal minority government have a strategy to reshape the Armed Forces? The official opposition Conservatives say they don't. Read all about the emerging debate in *The Hill Times'* upcoming policy briefing which will include columns from government critics, from the opposition benches, and interviews with Liberal Cabinet ministers.

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