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Harper vulnerable on political motives, should stick to governing, say pollsters

But SES pollster Nik Nanos says all parties are stalled in one way or another, except Greens, 'we're really in a holding pattern right now.'

By SIMON DOYLE

If Prime Minister Stephen Harper hopes to improve his polling numbers over the slow summer months, he should depart from attack-style politics, stick to governing, and use the time before the fall session to craft a vision for the country, pollsters and observers say.

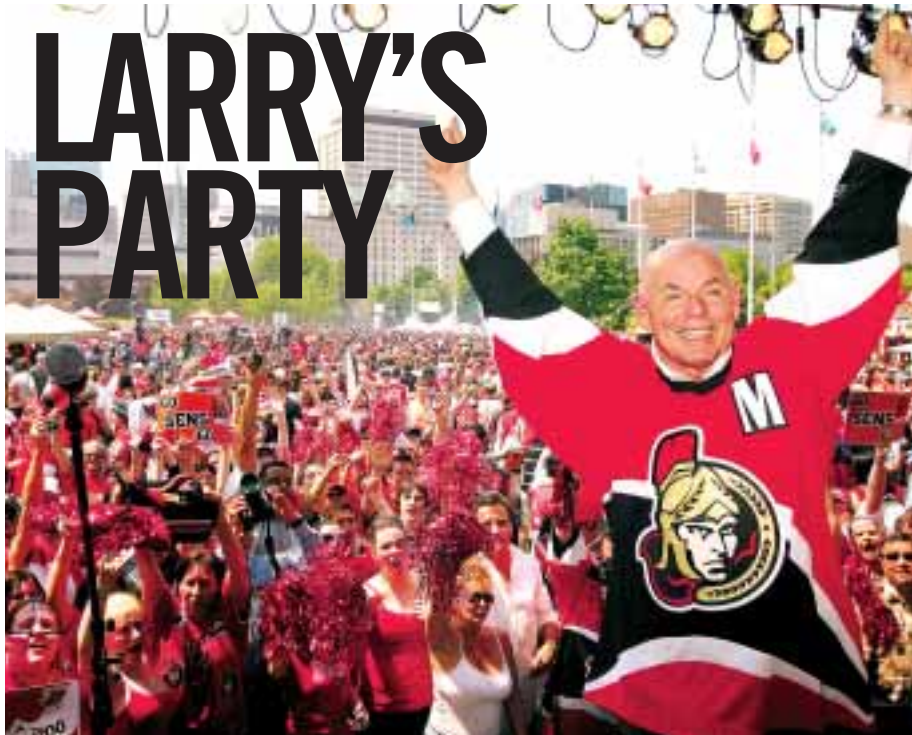
Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto, told *The Hill Times* last week that Mr. Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) needs to be seen as less partisan and more prime ministerial, and that the Tories' constant attacks on the opposition Liberals are not helping.

"You patronize the opposition. You hover above them. You demonstrate prime ministerial and statesmanlike qualities. You have risen from the street into the castle," Prof. Wiseman said, adding that the PM could use the summer to change the tone. "As long as he doesn't undermine his support he won't drop, and he might grow because people will get more used to the idea that he can manage the store."

Prof. Wiseman said Mr. Harper should avoid taking risks, such as the surprise vote to extend the Afghan mission last year and the spring budget that provided a windfall in equalization for Quebec just before the Quebec provincial election. "He's too clever by half on a lot of things," he said. "Just make it look like you're competent, and don't take risks where you could fall off the cliff."

Prime Minister Harper and his Cab-

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Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

Look ma, no hands: Some 5,000 flocked to Ottawa City Hall last week to cheer on the Senators. Ottawa Mayor Larry O'Brien didn't mind the limelight. The Senators are in the Stanley Cup finals.

Government won't release book on committees' strategies: government whip

Opposition parties cry foul, but Chief Government Whip Jay Hill says tactics have been used by governments and opposition parties since 1867.

By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH

The opposition parties are calling on the government to table its controversial, 200-page manual in the House on how to chair its Parliamentary

committees, but the Conservatives are "unlikely" to do so, says Chief Government Whip Jay Hill.

"I would say it's unlikely. It's an internal Conservative party document and we don't normally table our internal communication pieces between our caucus members in the House of Commons or with the media. At the moment I don't have any plans to share it outside of the caucus," Mr. Hill said.

National Post columnist Don Martin

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Parliament Hill press baffled by PMO's media relations

Some slam PMO's 'outrageously, heavy-handed, juvenile, petty, poisonous' approach to press.

By SIMON DOYLE

Parliamentary Press Gallery members say they are baffled and unable to explain the PMO's "heavy-handed" approach to media relations during Stephen Harper's

surprise trip to Afghanistan last week, in which reporters were threatened with arrest and shut out of an excursion the military planned with the media and the PM.

"I can't explain what's inside the guy's head. I just can't explain it, nor would I attempt to. It's just pathological, either his hatred or disdain for the media," Richard Brennan, a *Toronto Star* reporter and president of the press gallery, said in an interview last

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Conservatives need to consult on changing constitutional alignment of House seats

Others say Constitution Act 2007 is 'a working political compromise' on representation by population

By BEA VONGDOUANGCHANH

The minority governing Conservatives should have consulted Canadians and the provinces before introducing the sweeping Bill C-56, the Constitution Act 2007, which, if passed, will add another 22 seats to the House after the 2011 census, say some experts.

"Something as fundamental as this is something a minority government shouldn't bring in," University of Ottawa political science visiting professor Sharon Sutherland told *The Hill Times* last week. "There should've been a lot

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Confidence in parties hinges on cooperation in House: experts

'There's not a distinction between government and Parliament,' says political historian David Mitchell

By ABBAS RANA

Without the prospect of a federal election in the near future, the federal political parties risk losing the confidence of Canadians if their leaders do not get together to map out a healthy working relationship in the House and at Commons committees to get the business of government done, academics and Par-

liamentary experts say. "Unless the party leaders, the House leaders and the whips and the caucus chairs are able to find some way to make this work, this is going to be a very long and painful Parliament because there's no sign of an election on the horizon.

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FEATURE

Prime Minister should be less partisan and more prime ministerial, some government-watchers say

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inet have taken to attacking Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) in Question Period, often answering questions with a shot at the Liberals. Policy announcements have also attacked the Liberal record. The approach has shown a Conservative government in steady campaign mode, at times aggressively. The party ran French and English attack ads against Mr. Dion's leadership in January following the Liberal leader's victory in December. The Conservatives ran another set of French attack ads on Mr. Dion this spring.

Despite more than a year in power, however, the Tories have polled into majority government numbers fleetingly and infrequently. Although some polls in May showed the Conservatives with as much or more than 40 per cent support nationally, since then the party's numbers have dipped, with some polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals about even.

An Angus Reid poll released late last week, which surveyed 1,097 people nationally, found that only 33 per cent of respondents approve of the way Mr. Harper is handling his job as PM, a drop of seven points from a similar poll in March. Nationally, the Conservatives had 35 per cent of decided voters, the Liberals 28 per cent, and NDP 18 per cent, and the Green Party nine.

A Decima poll for the Canadian Press, released last week, found the Conservatives with 33 per cent support nationally, the Liberals with 31 per cent, the NDP 17 per cent, and the Green Party 10 per cent. The survey, which polled 1,000 people nationally, found the Liberals with more room for growth than the Conservatives among voters, with almost 25 per cent of those polled picking the Liberals as a second choice and 18 per cent of those polled choosing the Conservatives.

Similarly, an Ipsos-Reid poll for CanWest published May 19 found the Conservatives with 36 per cent nationally, the same amount of support they won in the 2006 election. The poll found the Liberals with 32 per cent, the NDP with 14, and the Green Party with seven. The poll surveyed 1,002 Canadians nationally.

Greg Lyle, managing director of the polling firm Innovative Research Group, said the Prime Minister has to be more careful about the perceptions of the motives behind his announcements and statements.

"He needs to work on motive. He needs to convince swing voters that when he does something on the environment, he does it because he cares about the environment, not because he's trying to trip the Liberals. What that calls for is to not complicate his policy-based announcements with partisan messaging," Mr. Lyle said. "When they come out with something new on the environment, focus on the environment. Don't focus on the Liberals."

Although he said the PM's tactic of

attacking the Liberals in Question Period is not necessarily hurting the Tories, because QP rarely makes the news, the Tories could improve their image if they focus on their own accomplishments and policies.

"There's no election right now. The Liberals aren't really all that visible and if he convinces people that this is a good government, then he'll do fine when it comes time to do the comparison [to the opposition in an election]. But if he keeps doing comparisons, it's harder for people to see it as a good government," Mr. Lyle said.

The prospect of a spring election has all but disappeared from the rumour mill north of the Queensway, now leading to speculation of a fall or 2008 election campaign. The House is scheduled to break for the summer on June 8, returning to business on Sept. 17.

Mr. Lyle, a former senior staffer for Ontario provincial premier

Mike Harris and the B.C. provincial Liberals, added that Mr. Harper could use the summer to devise a strong message about what he's trying to accomplish for Canada and could visit communities for announcements and speeches, which, although they may not bring media attention nationally, always deliver a splash in the local news.

"He could start maybe putting a little more focus on his values, his goals for Canada," he said. "With Canada Day, events like that, there's a great opportunity to give the sort of [Jean] Chrétien, 'I-love-Canada' speech.... That stuff works. That's a chance for him to rally Canadians as their leader."

Mr. Lyle said "retail politics" that target groups of voters can be especially effective in the ridings in the 905 belt around Toronto, the francophone suburbs of Montreal, and rural Quebec, which the Tories are eyeing for a majority government.

Nik Nanos, CEO of SES Research, said in an interview last week that a wholesale political makeover for Mr. Harper would be dangerous, however, because the public would likely see through it. "A makeover would be a tacit admission of failure," he said. "It's kind of like New Coke, right? There's the Coke brand, and it might have been tired, and maybe hadn't been changed for a long time, but the flirtation with the remaking of the Coke brand actually backfired." He added: "You cannot have a new, new Conservative government."

Mr. Nanos said that, in a minority government, most people view all politicians' motives as political opportunism, however. The larger challenge for Mr. Harper, he said, will be trying to get enough support for a majority government without alienating his core supporters. "The one extra factor in this whole equation is his quest to form a majority government, and the one thing that he has to watch out for is that he doesn't lose himself in that quest," Mr. Nanos said.

Prof. Wiseman said no political makeover is going to help the Tories now, and

that the party has to "keep praying" that the economy continues to roll along. He added that Mr. Harper has already undergone a political makeover as Prime Minister, pointing to the government's centrist 2007 budget and Mr. Harper's recognition of Quebec as a nation within Canada.

Mr. Nanos said the PM's trip to Afghanistan last week—which, along with the environment, is a policy issue where the Tories are seen as vulnerable—was a smart strategy to refocus Conservative messaging on the mission and shift discussion away from the controversy over the inhumane treatment of Afghan detainees.

Mr. Nanos said that Tory support could be built around action on issues that Canadians expect of them, such as traditional Conservative policy positions like tax cuts and safe communities.

"I think probably what would be more effective for the Conservatives would be just a refocus to start to kind of control the agenda a little more and to focus on the big issues," Mr. Nanos said. "The government has to step into the space that Canadians would naturally see them step into, like job creation, the economy, flexible federalism.... Those are just easier wins for the Conservatives."

Right now, he said, voters only see options they would vote against, not options they fully support. "It's kind of like menu politics. They're crossing people off the menu," he said of voters. "The polling numbers pretty much show that it's bad news for everybody, except for the Green Party. All the parties are stalled in one way or another, whether because of an issue or because of a leader. We're really in a holding pattern right now."

sdoyle@hilltimes.com
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Engineers' Hands Shape Our World

For Best Value - What is the "Best Practice" for Selecting Engineers?

Selecting the right engineering company based on qualifications – not low price bidding – leads to significant life-cycle savings by encouraging innovation and optimizing quality and sustainability.

The InfraGuide "Best Practice" for Selecting a Professional Consultant is a tool developed by the public sector for the public sector to protect our investment in our social, economic and environmental quality of life.

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The InfraGuide "Best Practice" is available on the Federation of Canadian Municipalities website. To access the document, visit www.thebestpractice.ca