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Liberal brand in trouble in Quebec, says Dion strategist

Top Dion leadership strategist Joe Jordan says Liberal brand 'isn't what it used to be in Quebec,' must rebuild credibility

By **ABBAS RANA**

After last week's disastrous results in the three Quebec byelections, the federal Liberals "clearly have an issue with the party's brand" and have to quickly rebuild credibility to survive in the province, says a top leadership campaigner for Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion.

Joe Jordan, a former Liberal MP who was an adviser on Mr. Dion's (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) successful leadership campaign last December, said the party's brand is clearly not what it used to be in Quebec, it has to do a much better job of articulating its vision for the country, and it has to distinguish itself from the other parties in order to win.

"The Liberals clearly have an issue with their brand. The party has got to get back to basics in terms of what's the vision that we're putting out there and start to rebuild credibility around that. To somehow suggest this is Dion's fault is a little bit silly. Equally silly is the notion that there was a group of

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Tories say Harper's 'flexible federalism' working in Quebec

By **ABBAS RANA**

Federal Conservatives say there may be a "paradigm shift taking place in Quebec electoral politics" after last week's three byelections, pointing out that the results show Quebecers endorse Prime Minister Stephen Harper's "flexible federalism" approach to Quebec and that they are turning away from the Bloc

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Shock and awe in Quebec byelections: NDP candidate Thomas Mulcair celebrates his victory in Outremont, top, with NDP Leader Jack Layton. Tory MP Denis Lebel cheers with Labour Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn in Roberval and Liberal candidate Jocelyn Coulon concedes defeat in Outremont last Monday night.

Canadian Press Photographs: by Paul Chiasson, Ryan Remiorz, and Jacques Boissint

StatsCan counted over one million children as 'unmarried' in report

Most Canadian adults, 12.4 million, are married, 2.8 million separated or divorced, 1.4 million widowed, and 7.6 million never married.

By **TOM KORSKI**

Statistics Canada counted more than one million children as "unmarried" in a report chronicling the single lives of Canadians, according to data requested by *The Hill Times*.

A Sept. 12 census document widely reported by media claimed for the first time in Canada's history "more than one half of the adult population was unmarried." The claim included 1,310,790 children aged 15 to 17, though children cannot legally marry under 18 in most provinces except with written permission of parents.

"I think the public and media should not necessarily take any statistic at face value," said Clarence Lochhead, executive director of the Vanier Institute of the Family. "All people should have a healthy skepticism in interpreting statistics."

StatsCan also counted 1.4 million widows and widowers as single in documenting its historic claim.

Rosemary Bender, director general of the agency's demographic statistics, said it was "up to users to interpret our data."

Industry Minister Jim Prentice (Calgary Centre-North, Alta.), who is responsible for StatsCan, was unavailable for comment.

Data not published in the 2006 census report *Family Portrait* confirmed most Canadian adults—12.4 million or 51 per cent—are married, with 2.8 million separated or divorced (12 per cent), 1.4 million widowed (six per cent) and 7.6 million never married (31 per cent).

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Fall election buzz heats up following Quebec byelections

Conservatives got more votes than they expected, and can now recruit 'star' candidates

By **SIMON DOYLE**

The Conservative government is awaiting winning conditions for a "highly probable" fall election, which may now hinge on whether the Ontario Progressive Conservatives win the provincial election on Oct. 10, pollster Jean-Marc Léger says.

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'Journalism is under siege across Canada,' journalists tell CRTC

CAJ and Canadian Media Guild say part of the reason for the decline in quality news comes from 'repurposed' content

By **SIMON DOYLE**

Media consolidation has reduced the quality of journalism in Canada, creating a "crisis in local news" and an environment in which journalists are overworked and fewer are "digging beyond the press release or the sound bite," journalists told a CRTC hearing last week.

"In the space of a daily news cycle, it is virtually impossible for one reporter to do an adequate job on a television news item, a newspaper story, a web story, even covering a routine press conference," Mary Agnes Welch, president of the Cana-

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NEWS

Fall election buzz heats up following Quebec byelections

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"The link between the provincial and the federal level is so important. If they succeed at the provincial level, they will call an election. It's like a domino effect. The byelections in Quebec, and [then] the Ontario election," Mr. Léger, president of Léger Marketing in Montreal, told *The Hill Times* last week. "After the Ontario election, we will know definitely if there will be an election or not, but it's highly probable."

The federal Conservatives are basking in the byelection results of Sept. 17, when Conservative candidate Denis Lebel took a traditional Bloc Québécois seat, Roberval-Lac-Saint-Jean, by a margin of nearly 10,000 votes. The Conservatives also came in a close second in Saint-Hyacinthe-Bagot, 1,478 votes behind new Bloc MP Ève-Mary Thériault.

"So for the first time among the French-speaking they got more votes than they expected," Mr. Léger said. "It's really important. It's enough for them to recruit star candidates for the next federal election in Quebec."

Conservative momentum arising from the three Quebec byelections on Sept. 17 was bolstered by a poor showing from the Liberals. Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) took responsibility for losing the traditional Liberal stronghold of Outremont, which NDP star candidate Thomas Mulcair won over Liberal candidate Jocelyn Coulon by a margin of 4,441 votes. Liberals last week acknowledged that they have much work to do in Quebec.

The Ontario provincial Liberals, led by Premier Dalton McGuinty, are leading in the polls in the provincial election, trailed by the Progressive Conservative Party led by John Tory. The polling numbers remain fairly stable, but the election race is considered too close to call, and a minority government could result. A Harris-Decima poll published Sept. 19 for *The Canadian Press* found the Ontario Liberals with 41 per cent support, the Conservatives with 32 per cent, the New Democrats with 14 per cent and the Green Party with 12 per cent. An Ipsos-Reid poll for *CanWest*, published Sept. 19, found 40 per cent support for the Liberals, 37 per cent for the Tories, 16 per cent for the NDP and six per cent for the Green Party.

Nationally, most observers say the federal Conservatives won't call a federal election until their polling numbers improve and they are near certain they can win a majority government. The Conservatives have been stalled in the polls nationally in recent months. A Harris-Decima poll for the *Canadian Press*, published Sept. 18, for instance, found 32 per cent support for Prime Minister Stephen Harper's (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) Conservatives and 29 per cent for Mr. Dion's Liberals. The NDP had 17 per cent support and the Green Party 14 per cent.

"Polls matter, but the polls measure what happened yesterday. You have to figure what will be the trend," Mr. Léger said of the federal Conservatives and whether they decide to call a fall election. "Voting intention is more important than polls. Polls don't vote."

Mr. Léger predicted that if John Tory loses the provincial election, even against a Liberal minority government, the Conservatives will wait for better winning conditions before they force a federal election. "If they lose, they lose. They will wait," Mr. Léger said. But if Mr. Tory wins a minority Conservative government, it could create enough momentum for the Conservatives to call an election. "All the winning conditions are there if they succeed in Ontario."

Innovative Research pollster Greg Lyle, however, told *The Hill Times* last week that the national polling numbers for the Conservatives carry less importance than some observers believe. The key decision for the Tories will be whether they believe they can significantly improve their level of support throughout the campaign, as they did in the 2006 election.

"It's not about where they start, it's about where they think they're going to end. I don't think the polling numbers need to move at all for them," Mr. Lyle said. "They need to have a plan in their mind that they believe, by the end of the campaign, will get them the votes they need to win. It doesn't really matter where they start."

Mr. Lyle said the main argument for going to an election this fall is the organizational disarray and "sniping" inside the Liberal Party. "Right now, the Liberals are doing a better job of attacking Dion than Harper is. With friends like that, who needs enemies?" Mr. Lyle said, referring to last week's allegations among Liberals that supporters of Liberal Deputy Leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) tried to sabotage the Outremont race to damage Mr. Dion's leadership. "When your main opponent is in disarray, it's just a fabulous opportunity to call an election."

Mr. Lyle added that the byelections were a good test for Conservative support in Quebec because they won a riding and received significant support in another even as the popular Quebec Royal 22nd Regiment, the Van Doos, are fighting in Afghanistan and suffering casualties. "The government was able to do very well despite that," Mr. Lyle said.

"The odds in favour of an election have actually increased since Monday," *Montreal Gazette* columnist L. Ian Macdonald wrote on Friday of last week. "Some senior Tory insiders now put the chances of the government surviving the confidence vote on the Throne Speech at no better than 50-50. Go figure."

The *National Newswatch* news aggregator posted an "Election Fever Meter" up



Photographs by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

Fall election speculation is hot: Prime Minister Stephen Harper, left, and Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion, right. "So for the first time among the French speaking they got more votes than they expected," Léger Marketing pollster Jean-Marc Léger said of the Conservatives. "It's really important. It's enough for them to recruit star candidates for the next federal election in Quebec."

its site last week. It reads the chance of a fall election "based on buzz and spin across the nation," which, in an apparently arbitrarily selected number, measured 58 per cent last Friday afternoon.

However, it remains unclear how the Conservatives would go about dissolving Parliament for an election. The government has passed a federal law for fixed elections, setting the date of the next election on Oct. 19, 2009. This makes it politically risky for the Tories to request that the Governor General dissolve Parliament for a general election.

Mr. Léger said the Conservative government would be wiser to engineer its own defeat on a confidence vote in the House, such as the vote on Throne Speech on Oct. 18, two days after the speech and the opening of the fall session on Oct. 16.

The government has a great deal of leverage in deciding whether the House falls or remains standing this fall, because, as the party numbers currently add up in the House, the Conservatives need the support of only one opposition party to pass a confidence test. At the same time, there are wedge issues on which all three opposition parties are united against the government. The three opposition parties have threatened to vote against the government's Throne Speech unless it contains a clear statement on Canada's withdrawal from Afghanistan, for instance. The Liberals, NDP and Bloc Québécois are also united on their support for the Kyoto Protocol, the targets in which the government says it will not try to meet.

Smarting from the byelection results, both the Conservatives and the NDP may be eager to go to the polls to capitalize on a weakened Liberal Party. But observers say the Bloc Québécois is intimidated by the prospect of an election in the midst of a damaged sovereignty movement, and observers say the Bloc cannot be seen to again prop up

the Conservatives on a confidence vote.

Mr. Léger said the Conservatives would be smart to cause a defeat in the House on an issue like the environment or an economic platform. The Prime Minister could say, "I propose this for Canada, and if the opposition does not support it, we will go to an election," Mr. Léger said. "Something direct, not something sneaky. The electorate would not appreciate that."

Similarly, Mr. Lyle said Mr. Harper has to have an explanation for an election, and Afghanistan or the environment may suffice. "Those are not the best issues to get into an election campaign on, but once you're in, then you can turn the channel to something you're better on. That's supposed to work in theory, but John Tory's having a hard time changing the channel in Ontario."

However, Nik Nanos, CEO of SES Research, said the Conservatives are not ready for a fall election because the byelection results are not representative of national opinion. The Conservative and NDP wins in the byelections were mostly a result of star local candidates, not party support, he said. (Mr. Lebel is a popular former mayor and Mr. Mulcair is a popular former cabinet minister in the Quebec Liberal government of Liberal Premier Jean Charest.) All of the parties continue to be in more or less of a holding pattern, Mr. Nanos said.

"I would be a little cautious on the Conservative side to think that they scored a major ideological victory. I think it's a bit of a tempered victory for the Conservatives and even the New Democrats," Mr. Nanos said. "Quebec's the game. The Conservatives have to turn their numbers around in Quebec.... If there isn't a likelihood at forming a majority government, there's no use in really calling an election for the Conservatives."

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