

## Tory supporters blast Harper for his 'summer of silence'

Chief of staff quits; latest poll shows Conservative leader now in third place

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The Ottawa Citizen

*August 16, 2005*

Two stalwarts of Conservative party policy accused leader Stephen Harper yesterday of failing to offer Canadians a real alternative to the Liberals, calling him "an echo" of Prime Minister Paul Martin and the government's agenda.

Gerry Nicholls, head of the National Citizens Coalition and a one-time Harper disciple, and Canadian Taxpayers Federation director John Williamson, accused the federal Tories of making major strategical errors in a national tour this summer by failing to offer voters a tangible policy platform that sets them apart 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," Mr. Williamson said.

While Canadians have spent much of the last two weeks fretting about the rising price of oil and its effect on gasoline prices, the Tories missed an opportunity to advance their mission with the electorate, said Mr. Williamson, who called Mr. Harper's tour of mainly contestable Ontario ridings over the last two months "the summer of silence." He also griped about the absence of a day-care policy, which was expected this summer.

"The Conservative party professes to want lower ... gasoline taxes and choice when it comes to day care, but that message has not been articulated by the party leadership," he said.

Mr. Nicholls served as Mr. Harper's second-in-command at the National Citizens Coalition before the Tory leader returned to public life. He said the party has not yet given Canadians a reason to support it in a coming federal election, which is expected early in 2006.

"I suppose they have their own game plan that they're following through on, but from my perspective I think they're making a mistake," he said.

"I think what they're trying to do is they're trying to get people to like Stephen Harper, but I think what they have to do ... is get people to agree with Stephen Harper, to agree with issues and agree with his stand on issues."

There have been rumblings among Canada's political class for weeks as the Conservatives continue to give way in public opinion polls to the Grits and New Democratic Party. An SES survey yesterday, which pitted the leaders of the three major parties against one another, showed Mr. Harper in third place behind Mr. Martin and the NDP's Jack Layton.

That concern was heightened yesterday when Mr. Harper's chief-of-staff, Phil Murphy,

resigned his post after three years with the Conservative leader. Mr. Murphy's departure follows that of a host of Tory strategists, including chief party spokesman Geoff Norquay, since Parliament broke for its summer recess in June.

Mr. Williamson believes "the party's adrift," and fears the lack of direction at Tory headquarters in Ottawa is laying waste to a key opportunity in the summer months to sell the party to Canadians.

"It strikes me as though they might actually believe they're on summer vacation," he said. "The goal was for Mr. Harper to get out and meet Canadians. ... What the party failed to do was to mesh the barbecue tour with issues that resonate with Canadians. I'm not just talking about saying what's popular. I'm talking about contrasting (Liberal) policy."

Conservative MPs yesterday maintained the party is satisfied with progress made this summer, and not concerned with the recent criticism.

Alberta MP Jason Kenney said Mr. Harper and his colleagues have been successful in meeting tens of thousands of voters this summer. He said this -- not the unveiling of official policy -- has been the ultimate goal.

"We've made a deliberate decision not to unveil our entire electoral platform until the campaign because the Liberals have a well-established habit of policy kleptocracy. They steal our good ideas too often."

The only policy plank the Tories have announced this summer was a plan to give tax cuts to people riding public transit, which came out earlier this month. Ironically, it was the NDP who accused the Tories at the time of stealing ideas out of its 2004 election platform.

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