

Tories' 'new' slogan is getting old

After 18 months in power, enough already: Poll

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Canadians are growing weary of the Conservative government's claim it is still "Canada's New Government" after 18 months in power, a recent poll shows.

The sentiment accompanies other surveys that suggest voters are getting impatient not just with the slogan, but the government itself.

And although the mid-summer doldrums have descended on political life, with two of the opposition leaders on vacation, a leading pollster warns that the government can't assume no one's paying attention.

"People still watch TV, they still read the newspapers and if people are inclined to talk about politics, they'll talk about it," says Greg Lyle, whose Innovative Research Group plumbed the post-solstice voter mood for the Hill Times newspaper.

The survey published this week found it's not just members of the cynical press corps and opposition backroomers who groan every time they see a news release containing the Conservative party's new -- most would say old -- claim of freshness.

Three-quarters of the voters who responded to the Innovative Research survey objected to the phrase, some because they find it stale and some because they objected from the start.

The poll found 37 per cent thought it was OK in 2006, when the government was new, but now put it in the misleading-advertising category. Another 38 per cent said the Conservatives should never have used it to describe the government in general, as the Tories do, since the government is permanent.

Only 16 per cent, most of them Conservative supporters, believe the phrase still fits the Harper government, the survey found. The poll of 802 Canadians is accurate to within 3.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Mr. Lyle said views about the claim to newness shouldn't pose a problem for Mr. Harper, though, unless attention shifts to whether it remains appropriate -- which, it seems, has become the case.

Of 228 mentions of the phrase in a Library of Parliament news archive for the last three months, a handful involved barbs in news columns or letters to the editor. A surprisingly large number were direct quotations from government news releases.

"If it becomes a story in and of itself, then it's a problem," says Mr. Lyle.

SES Research pollster Nik Nanos agrees, suggesting the same might apply to surveys that suggest declining or stagnant support for the Conservatives, in terms of electoral preference.

A June Environics poll published July 12 gave the Tories 37 per cent support, essentially their showing in the election 18 months ago. A Strategic Counsel survey conducted July

12-15 gave Mr. Harper's party only 31 per cent, tied with the Liberals.

Mr. Nanos says the government can't rely on slogans as it begins to prepare a new agenda to release in the fall. "They're being reactive, not proactive," he said.

The first step is the Conservative parliamentary caucus Aug. 1-3 in Charlottetown, which has already fuelled Parliament Hill rumours about discontent over timing. The meeting ends the Friday before the civic holiday weekend, when MPs normally spend time with constituents.

The early caucus could signal an unusually early pickup in political life.

With that possibility in mind, NDP leader Jack Layton is on a "working holiday" in Portugal, where he and his wife, MP Olivia Chow, are combining official meetings with time off, and Liberal leader St?phane Dion is away for two weeks at his cottage in the Laurentians.

Mr. Harper won't take a conventional holiday, says his communications director, Sandra Buckler.

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