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SUN News Columnists

Greg Weston

Tue, May 8, 2007



Tory troubles

By GREG WESTON

As the tulip gardens of the national capital sprout their perennial springtime extravaganza of a million blooms, voter support for Stephen Harper and his Conservative government is wilting with similar flourish.

An exclusive SES Research poll for Sun Media shows popular backing of the ruling Conservatives withering to around its lowest level since the minority Harper government came to office more than 15 months ago.

Dead heat

As a result, the SES-Sun survey indicates that if an election were held today, the Conservatives and Liberals would be in a virtual dead heat in the ballot count, each with the support of about 33% of committed voters.

That is roughly a four-point drop for Harper's party just in the past month.

The poll shows the Conservatives losing ground in Ontario, the West, and particularly in Quebec where public opinion has tanked by a whopping 11 points to 17% from 28% last month, almost all of it moving to the Liberals.

Support for the New Democrats has remained relatively stable at 17%, while the

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only winner appears to have been Elizabeth May and her Green Party, almost doubling their national popularity to 10%.

Bottom line is an election anytime soon could produce either a Conservative or Liberal government, and almost certainly a minority.

While the SES poll did not ask Canadians why they are turning off the Conservatives in droves, several factors are evident.

The first is the survey was conducted in the midst of the recent Commons kerfuffle over the possible torture of Afghan prisoners.

Day after day, the PM and various cabinet ministers have come up with different claims and contradictions about the treatment of Afghan detainees, and what the Canadian government has known and done (or not done) to protect them.

Aside from the substance of the controversy, the overall impression has been that the Conservatives are up to their white-out in a cover-up, and that neither the PM nor any of his responsible ministers at defence, foreign affairs, justice, or public security was on top of the file.

In Quebec, the fallout from the blow-up over Afghanistan has been particularly devastating to Conservative political fortunes.

The latest SES survey shows Harper's party would likely lose some of its existing seats in that province in an imminent election, a dramatic change from only a month ago when some pundits were predicting a 20-seat gain for the Tories.

SES pollster Nik Nanos points out that Quebec has now become a highly volatile see-saw battle between the Liberals and Conservatives, with about 10% of popular opinion swinging back and forth between the two parties on an almost monthly basis.

Nanos says the survey sends a loud message to Harper and his government — they have to somehow change the political channel from Afghanistan to more popular domestic issues.

The other major issue likely driving the Conservative numbers south is the environment.

The recent unveiling of the Harper government's plan to cut greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants appears to have helped the Green party more than the Conservatives.

Despite all the negative numbers for the Conservatives, pollster Nanos warns that the survey results are no reason for celebration among Liberals.

On the one hand, the good news for the Grits is voter support for the Liberals appears to be holding steady despite Stephane Dion's uninspiring leadership.

The bad news is the Liberals are going nowhere, despite all the apparent voter dissatisfaction with the Conservatives.

"There are really no winners in all this," Nanos says of the SES poll. "It is almost as though the parties are in a stalemate, and that could very well become the hallmark of Canadian politics over the coming months."

In other words, Canadians are just not impressed with any of them.

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