

Conservatives no closer to majority, pollster says

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FRANCES RUSSELL

SPRING election fever is fading in Ottawa. Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, the Ottawa polling firm that called both the 2004 and 2006 elections within less than a percentage point for each party, says the main reason is Prime Minister Stephen Harper has "thrown everything but the kitchen sink" at winning a majority, but he just isn't there.

SES's April 8 poll has Conservatives at 36 per cent and Liberals at 33 per cent -- a statistical tie.

Harper's perpetual quest for his elusive prize resembles the grainy movies of the first attempts at flight: people frantically running or pedalling flimsy, fantastical winged craft across a field, taking off and flying for a few seconds and then plunging back to earth.

Each time Harper nudges up to the magical 40 per cent threshold, the media rewards him with bold, black newspaper headlines and newscast leads. And each time, the next poll shows him back at 36 per cent, where he was on election night Jan. 23, 2006.

Nanos says the prime minister has definitely improved his standing with Canadians. "There are a number of things the Conservatives have done that Canadians like," he said in an interview. These include working on his party's five priorities, focusing on trust, accountability and open government, providing more money to the provinces, avoiding hot button issues like the gun registry, recognizing Quebec as a nation and moving to moderate his image.

But Harper has not been able to completely erase the "scary-extreme-hidden agenda" moniker stuck on him from his days as a Reform/Canadian Alliance MP.

Nanos compares it to the stock market. "A stock moves up all of a sudden and someone says, 'Hold on a second.' And then you get a correction. It shows how conflicted Canadians are. Once (Conservative support) reaches a certain level and Canadians start thinking about Harper and the Conservatives forming a majority, they start to get a little nervous and the numbers go back down."

Some pundits are saying minority is as good as it gets for Harper's Conservatives, that they have exhausted the limits of their appeal. Others think Canada's political culture is now so fragmented that majority government is out of reach

for all parties, period.

Nanos has another perspective, arising from what he calls the "resiliency of the Liberal brand." He points out the last election was all about punishing Liberals. But even with a criminal investigation, a botched campaign, a tired leader and an error-free Conservative campaign, the Liberals still got 100 seats and 30 per cent of the vote.

"The Liberal brand is resilient. We are in an environment where it's not enough for the Conservatives to do a good job politically. They need the Liberals to make mistakes in order to get to majority territory."

The sponsorship scandal was a huge gift to the Conservatives in 2006. It now appears to be the gift that keeps on giving, at least in Quebec. Liberal numbers plunged on news of fraud charges against adman Jean Lafleur, Nanos notes.

Naturally, the Conservatives have launched another probe of Liberal government contracting practices, this one involving polls. But by giving sensitive federal 1995 Quebec referendum polling data to a former Parti Québécois cabinet minister -- Harper's choice to head the probe -- the prime minister may have outsmarted himself and invited a backlash.

Nanos draws parallels to the 1993 election. In that campaign, Liberal leader Jean Chrétien faced the same media dissing and attacks that Dion does today.

"Prior to the election Chrétien was yesterday's man, a Trudeau cabinet minister, too old, too tired, not in touch, past his prime. All it took was one negative ad from the Conservatives that just went too far and Chrétien became a victim and he went from being a victim to defeating the Conservatives and turning his complete reputation around," Nanos says.

"And that's the one thing the Conservatives have to be very careful of. If they keep running negative ads and if one of those negative ads goes a little too far, then it actually might have the opposite effect. It might actually re-ignite Dion's image and he will be able to get up and say: 'See, I told you. They are extreme. They go too far.'"

Although he finds himself in a distinct minority, Nanos believes the controversial deal between Dion and Green Party Leader Elizabeth May is "strategically, a very good move for the Liberals."

It makes the next election about Harper "from the very beginning." It validates Greens -- and perhaps others -- to vote strategically for the Liberals to prevent another Conservative government.

"It's going to be kind of like a U.S. election, fairly polarized, people who just don't like Stephen Harper and people who do."

And there's more trouble on Harper's horizon. "Another issue as we look forward is Canadians asking, 'If the Conservatives have a majority, how long would we be in Afghanistan?' This is an issue to really watch."