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Harper Tories can't break into majority territory
By SUE BAILEY

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OTTAWA (CP) - Stephen Harper has run a pretty tight ship as prime minister and earned kudos for competence, yet his Conservatives are mired in minority-government territory.



Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. (CPimages/John Woods)

After winning 36 per cent of the vote in last year's election, the Tories haven't moved much - apart from a short-lived upward bounce after last month's big-spending budget.

Theories abound as to why Harper's overall positive leadership rating, especially when compared to Stephane Dion's underwhelming debut as Liberal chief, has not won more support for his party.

Pundits and political scientists alternately cite voter contentment, electoral fatigue and historical polling trends. Others raise points that aren't as easily pinned down.

"My mother doesn't like him," one Conservative insider who didn't want to be named said of Harper. "I don't know, she just doesn't like him. It's something he emanates."

Harper's personal image has come a long way since the days when his fiercest rivals wrote him off as a far-right ideologue with ice water in his veins.

"Harper is who he is," said Tim Powers, an Ottawa lobbyist and Tory backroomer.

"And like every other human being, he's not perfect. He doesn't try to be perfect. And I



poll

Is Boris Yeltsin responsible for helping bring about democracy in Russia?

- Yes
- No
- It's not democratic yet

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think people are adjusting to him as they adjusted to Martin, Chretien and to Mulroney.

"He's not this big, scary, fire-breathing, freak-show psychotic that the Liberal party described him as."

Powers says Harper is in reality closer to a "Tim Hortons dad" - albeit a Tim Hortons dad who employs a publicly funded personal image stylist and still struggles to check a notorious mean streak.

A recent case in point was when Harper sabotaged his own spate of generally positive headlines after last month's budget. He was widely criticized, even by right-leaning observers, for suggesting in question period that Liberal MPs care more for Taliban suspects detained in Afghanistan than for Canadian troops.

Public doubts about Harper linger, said David Docherty, a political scientist and dean of arts at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont.

"There still seems to be a slight unease. He's been unable to capitalize on the problems that Dion is having."

That suggests that, despite initial disappointment in the bookish Liberal leader's halting first months in the job, voters aren't showing much desire to switch political stripes just yet, says Docherty.

"People, before they abandon one party, need another home to go to. And it's clear that they're not ready to go to Stephen Harper."

The prime minister has made some gains but must still reach out to women and urban voters in particular, Docherty added.

He believes a lack of a credible Conservative policy to ease public concern about climate change, along with a patchy record on child-care services, could be a "millstone" dragging Harper's momentum in exactly the ridings he needs to sway.

Ottawa pollster Nik Nanos of SES Research agrees that Harper must build trust.

"I think there are residual concerns among voters - especially women and urban voters. The only way for the Conservatives to really turn those numbers around is incrementally over time."

It would also help if Dion made some kind of major gaffe, Nanos suggested.

"We're in an environment right now where it's not enough for the Conservatives to do everything right. They need the Liberals to do things wrong."

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Nanos points out that Harper personally scores highest among party leaders when it comes to suitability for the PM's job.

"He's at 42 per cent, and we have the Conservatives at 36 per cent" in terms of popularity. "So Stephen Harper's in majority territory, but the Conservative brand is not."

Dion was considered the most suitable prime minister by just 17 per cent of respondents, yet his party hovers around 33 per cent of voter support.

"One thing Stephane Dion has going for him is a very resilient Liberal brand," says Nanos.

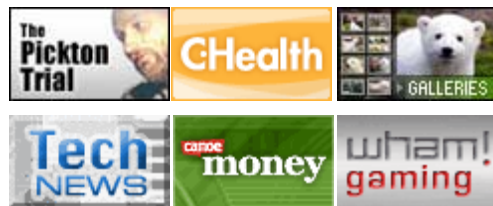
Further complicating Harper's push to win over the vote-rich middle of the political spectrum is the delicate matter of Western sensibilities, says Faron Ellis, a political scientist at Lethbridge College in Alberta.

Ellis, a longtime researcher of Canada's conservative parties, contends that Harper can't take for granted his supposed bedrock of fiscal and social conservatives, many of whom are "bitterly disappointed" in his performance.

Top beefs, according to this view, are the omission of broad-based tax cuts in the recent federal budget, and the perception that Harper disingenuously allowed for only the most cursory reconsideration of same-sex marriage. There is also an irate cluster of voters still seething over the move to tax income trusts after Harper specifically promised in the last election that he wouldn't.

Ellis says it would be perilous for Harper to think that former Canadian Alliance and Reform supporters in the West will stick with the Tories simply because they have nowhere else to go.

"Wanna bet? . . . If the Conservatives believe all Westerners are a captive audience, they're mistaken."



opinion



Whistle-blown

Among all the disturbing revelations of missing money and other hanky-panky in the RCMP pension department, a simple, spontaneous outburst of laughter at a recent Commons committee hearing speaks volumes about the depth of the Mounties' malaise. **Full Column**

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