

Stephane's cool but Stephen has gas

By STEPHEN MAHER Letter From Ottawa

CONSIDER, PLEASE, these two headlines in today's news:

No Ice at the North Pole

Oil Hits Record \$141 US

The first is disturbing news from the top of the world, where, scientists report, the Arctic Ocean is covered with only a thin layer of ice, which may completely melt this summer — evidence that climate change is proceeding faster than anticipated, with potentially grim consequences.

The second is disturbing news from the deserts of Arabia, which means consumers will pay more to fill their gas tanks this summer, more to fill their oil tanks this winter and more to buy food at the supermarket, with potentially grim consequences.

Which story is more important to you?

Now think about Stephane Dion and Stephen Harper, and think about whom you would rather have dealing with a world in which the climate is changing and energy prices are going up.

That is the question voters will face in the next election — which may come this fall.

Until that day, the political players in Ottawa will be engaged in a struggle to frame the issues in a way that is advantageous to them. Mr. Dion wants you thinking about the North Pole. Mr. Harper wants you thinking about the gas pumps.

The Tories kicked off this struggle to control the frame of the national discussion this spring with a defiantly lowbrow ad campaign attacking "Dion's Tax on Everything," weeks before Mr. Dion revealed his plan for a carbon tax. The Conservatives did radio ads, a pamphlet campaign, yellow T-shirts and irritating, dim-witted advertisements with an animated grease spot that were meant to run on gas pump video screens in southern Ontario.

Gas station owners declined to run the ads at the pumps, out of fear, no doubt, that motorists confronted with an animated grease spot spewing political propaganda would smash the screens with their tire irons.

Then, after Mr. Dion rolled out his plan, with green T-shirts and a booklet promising tax

cuts for everyone, Mr. Harper mocked it, then seemed to lose his temper, saying Mr. Dion wanted to "screw everybody in the country."

Mr. Dion responded by challenging Mr. Harper to debate him on television, an offer Mr. Harper has wisely ignored.

Mr. Harper does not want to debate Mr. Dion, not just because it would give Mr. Dion a soapbox to stand on but because the terms of the debate would be set by the Liberal leader. If the national debate is about the environment, the Conservatives will be losing. Their plan to reduce emissions has been panned by every environmental group in the country, and the Tories do not want to discuss it. You can tell, because Environment Minister John Baird, who specializes in attacking the Liberals, has been kept away from this debate, the better to avoid reminding people of the Tory green record.

The Tories could mount a reasoned critique of the Liberal plan — it could put our economy at risk if we move faster than our American neighbours — but they would rather not.

Because if we are talking about taxes, the preferred Tory frame, then Mr. Dion will be losing. His message is very complicated compared to the simple Conservative attack. Mr. Dion's "Green Shift" would increase taxes on the emissions blamed for global warming and reduce taxes on income and investment. Economists like his plan but it's difficult to explain, and there's a saying in politics: if you're explaining, you're losing.

It will be hardest to explain in rural Canada, where many people make their living in industries that produce emissions and where people are more sensitive to price increases and more skeptical of the government.

This is making Liberal MPs in rural Nova Scotia nervous, because whatever its virtues as a policy proposal, the Green Shift is not the kind of thing you'd make up if you were setting out to woo fishermen and pulp workers.

Politically, Mr. Dion's plan appears designed to reach urban, left-wing, environmentally conscious voters.

This is a savvy move for the Liberal party, which must at all costs avoid letting Mr. Harper win a majority in the next election. That would send the Liberals to the wilderness for at least four years.

By moving to the left with a plan like this, Mr. Dion is playing defensive politics, making it less likely that his party will be wiped out in its urban strongholds. If he must lose rural seats to hang on to his city seats, he will just have to do so. That would reinforce the growing Canadian political divide, with the Tories safe in the country and the Liberals, Bloc, NDP and Greens fighting for the cities.

The good news for Mr. Dion is that there are more city people than country people, and he could theoretically win an election without persuading one person who voted Tory last time to vote for him — if he could consolidate the vote on the left.

In time-honoured fashion, the Liberals move to the left in opposition, seeking votes from the NDP.

The NDP, which has seen this movie before and not enjoyed it, is responding to the

pressure by attacking Mr. Dion, complaining, not very persuasively, that a carbon tax wouldn't reduce emissions.

The bad news for Mr. Dion, according to Nanos Research, is that this year health care and the economy overtook the environment as the most pressing issues for Canadians.

He intends to spend the summer selling a plan that depends on people worrying about the North Pole at a time when all they can think about is the gas pumps.

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