

By **NIK NANOS**

"The time for accountability has arrived." That's the very first sentence from Stephen Harper in the 2006 federal Conservative election platform.

A combination of events -- the right message (trust us) at the right time (RCMP criminal investigation) resulted in the Harper minority victory. Canadians were mad at the Liberals and were ready for change. Harper and the Conservatives were perceived as not only an alternative choice, but an alternative approach to governing. Polling conducted by Nanos Research for CPAC during the election showed the Harper Tories strong on trust.

In the first year in Tory mandate, Canadians saw Prime Minister Harper roll out the Federal Accountability Act, which, beyond the details, was a symbol of how a Harper government would conduct itself differently.

Fast forward to 2008 and the political "trust" environment is quite different. A government which was in large part elected in reaction to the Liberals and the advertising and sponsorship scandal now faces a series of trust issues to manage, the most recent flare-up being the Conservative election "in and out" scheme that Elections Canada has questioned.

The challenge for the government is the emergence of a narrative that, although it may not be breaking the rules, it is pushing the rules to the limit -- be it having discussions with Chuck Cadman related to his vote in the House of Commons, or how it managed its advertising spending during the 2006 federal election.

CASUALTY

The first casualty of this narrative is likely to be the perceptions Canadians have of politicians and politics because it taps into a cynicism that already exists. The refrain "they're all the same" -- quickly comes to mind for many Canadians when they describe those we elect to represent us all.

The second casualty is the major distraction that results in the media and in the House of Commons. In January, Nanos-Sun Media polling showed Canadians were concerned about the strength of the economy in 2008. Although the broad economic indicators remain steady, polling indicates we are in a psychological recession.

As the opposition parties attempt to take political advantage of the Elections Canada investigation, there are some big issues such as the economy, Afghanistan, the environment and health care, to name a few, that Canadians are concerned about.

The only potential political beneficiaries of this environment could be the Bloc and the NDP. For BQ Leader Gilles Duceppe, the potential erosion of trust for the Conservatives is strategically tailor-made. In one fell swoop he can attack both the Conservatives and the Liberals in Quebec.

The same holds true for NDP Leader Jack Layton. On the trust issue, he can attack both the Grits and the Tories and increase his chances of holding onto nervous New Democrats who might consider voting Liberal to block another potential Conservative win. If the 17-year-old Tom Lukiwski anti-gay video is any indicator, Layton has to be careful how he attacks the Conservative government.

NDP TO GRIT

The most recent polling conducted throughout the focus on Lukiwski showed some NDP support in Ontario moving to the Grits -- very reminiscent of the 2004 federal election which Harper lost.

To paraphrase the prime minister, the time for accountability will come again -- at the next election. Canadians will judge all the leaders and parties -- not just on how they leveraged political advantage but what they have actually accomplished since 2006.



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