

By **NIK NANOS**

Not long into the Harper mandate, it was evident that the "phoney war" was on. The Tories would repeatedly throw down the election gauntlet and the Dion Liberals would blink, and blink and blink again.

The Conservatives were generous in identifying legislation as matters of confidence and Canada was almost perpetually on the brink of a federal election.

Liberal parliamentary contortions in the House of Commons have kept the Harper Conservative government alive longer than many expected. An outside look at the pattern of behaviour might lead one to conclude that the Conservatives have a strong upper hand.

A look at the polling, however, shows a political reality different from the dynamic in the House of Commons. The Nanos Research/Sun Media federal political tracking has consistently shown the Conservatives and the Liberals in a tight race. Harper does have an advantage as to who Canadians think would make the best PM, but a significant number of Canadians are parking with unsure and none of the above.

Considering the Conservatives have thrown everything including the kitchen sink at the Liberals and they are still mired in a dead heat must make one pause. If attack ads, tax cuts and being recognized as a competent and a solid government by average Canadians isn't enough to win support for the Conservatives, what will?

DAILY TACTICS

It would seem that the Conservatives have still not shed the attitude or tone of an opposition party. They have been masterful in their daily tactics and attacks, but more than two years into their mandate, the average Canadian would likely be hard pressed to describe what a Stephen Harper Canada would look like in 10 years.

What seems to be missing is the ability to pull those policy threads together into a politically consumable, positive and succinct vision for Canada. Until that emerges, even with the tough election talk, the Conservatives going into an election will be vulnerable. Polling during the last election showed that mistrust of the Liberals propelled the Conservatives into power, but in the next federal election the Conservatives will have a record to defend.

Also of note, in Quebec where the mistrust of the Liberals was most intense, the Conservatives made a breakthrough.

However, this fall season may not necessarily bring fair political weather for the Harper government. If the Bernier affair flares up in the fall in committee, it may spell trouble for the Tories in Quebec. Add the Elections Canada campaign spending investigation and the Cadman tapes to the mix and there are many fires for Harper to fight.

One advantage Harper does have is the current political narrative on Liberal Leader Stephane Dion. The polls have Dion trailing Harper personally, the Conservatives have been relentless in their attacks and the Green Shift plan has not yet yielded a bounce in the polls.

SOUNDS LIKE A TAX

Even for Canadians who are open to the environmental message, the Green Shift sounds very much like a tax plan. It's not surprising the Conservatives have gone on the tax attack and undermined the ability of the Dion Liberals to launch an aspirational environmental message.

Because a sense of urgency has not been conveyed to voters, staking Liberal fortunes on the environment as an election winner is a risky strategy.

So, there you have it. Both Harper and Dion face greater risks than their rhetoric suggests. The phoney war and tough talk will continue, but a reasoned quiet look at the numbers tells a different story.

