

Torture allegations can't dent Tories' armour

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The storm raging over whether the Canadian government turned a blind eye to the possible torture of detainees in Afghan jails appears to have left the country puzzled over what, and whom, to believe.

A new Nanos Research poll of 1,003 Canadians found that fewer than half – 48.8 per cent – had even heard of the issue.

Those who have been paying attention are split on what to believe: 37.8 per cent said they believe the Conservative government transferred detainees to Afghan security forces “knowing they might be tortured,” but a roughly equal portion, 36.3 per cent, believe the Conservative government “would never knowingly pass detainees to Afghan security forces if they thought they might be tortured.” Another 25.9 per cent were unsure.

“The overall confusion on this issue has meant that it has not been a significant vulnerability for the governing Conservatives,” said pollster Nik Nanos.

The responses from those who had heard of the issue – 489 Canadians – are deemed accurate within an error margin of 4.5 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

The tangle of conflicting claims surrounding detainees' treatment is more knotty because the political parties are not viewed as credible on the issue: Fewer than 20 per cent of respondents rated any party better than neutral on a credibility scale, with the Tories, on average, viewed as slightly less credible than the Liberals or New Democrats.

But respondents do feel one player has far more credibility: the military.

This is perhaps one reason the Conservative government has made it a practice to respond to questions about whether political leaders ignored torture warnings by insisting Canadian soldiers acted in exemplary fashion.

“We have soldiers who are far from their families in a very violent and very dangerous country,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper said in a TVA television interview taped on Monday.

“And I think they are doing an exceptional job of managing these problems.”