

## Economic fears mount

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With Canadians suddenly facing the worst threat in decades to their standard of living, the country's economic health is shaping up as a wild card that could drastically alter the next election.

Warning signs in the form of higher gasoline prices, financial market troubles and lost manufacturing jobs have been on the rise since last summer. As overall unemployment in Canada has remained low, voters have been slow to grow alarmed, pollsters say. But this appears to be rapidly changing along with the shockwaves that are quickly imperilling much of what Canadians take for granted in their day-to-day lives.

Caught up in a global supply squeeze, drivers are already paying about \$1.20-a-litre at the gas pump and readying for the pain of higher prices. The plunging United States economy has put Ontario on the brink of a recession and the world food shortage will mean a spike in everyone's grocery bills. A new poll shows that more than half of Canadians say they are now worried about a recession and 55 per cent say they don't feel Prime Minister Stephen Harper is offering much optimism or inspiration.

The tumultuous economy will be high on the agenda when MPs return to Parliament on Monday after a week's spring break. And it is certain to loom large in the next federal election. If the gathering economic storm bursts over Canada in full force in the months ahead, it could shake up the political landscape and severely test Harper's ability to convince voters that he deserves another mandate.

"If you're well into an economic downturn, it doesn't matter who's in power — they get blamed for it," said University of Toronto political scientist Nelson Wiseman.

But it's not clear if the Liberals' Stéphane Dion would be able during an election to turn an economic

slump to his political advantage.

“It’s not going to be enough for the opposition parties just to criticize the Conservatives” on economic issues, said says pollster Nik Nanos, CEO of Nanos Research. “The Liberals shouldn’t be rubbing their hands thinking that a downturn in the economy will be to their good fortune, because after the first question on what the Conservatives should be doing, the next question will be, ‘Okay, Stéphane Dion, what’s your vision on how to deal with these problems?’”