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Has the Tory train gone off the rails?

John Ivison, National Post

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Tom Hanson/Reuters

Stephen Harper looks on at Stephane Dion during the English-language debate on Thursday night.

Has the Conservative election campaign stalled? Two polls out yesterday seemed to confirm an anecdotal feeling that the Tories peaked too early and have lost momentum before the fat lady has even started clearing her throat.

Harris/Decima on Thursday had the Conservatives 13 points ahead of the Liberals with 36% support. However, their momentum poll suggested a spike in the number of people less inclined to vote Conservative. A poll for CPAC by Nanos Research had the Tories 11 points ahead but suggested that fewer people considered Stephen Harper to be the best candidate for prime minister than last week.

The hours after the English-language debate are never the best time to make definitive statements on polling trends - many people are in the process of making up their minds and it won't be until early next week that the current molten volatility subsides and hardens.

The Conservatives are certainly wary of complacency. "We're in a good position, but we're some way from closing the deal," said one senior party figure. Those with access to party polling on both sides of the political divide are convinced that a Liberal victory is not going to happen. But the Conservatives haven't written off the Grits' ability to provide a focal point for the anti-Harper vote and limit them to a thin minority.

The Prime Minister has dodged a lot of ordnance fired in his direction in recent days and there's no doubt some of it has landed pretty close. The ballyhoo in Quebec over arts cuts and the jailing of young offenders has invigorated the Bloc Québécois and

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mented the prospect of double-digit Conservative gains in that province. People are still dying from listeriosis and Canadians are still waiting to hear from Gerry Ritz, the fleet-footed Agriculture Minister.

Then there was the controversy over the speech Mr. Harper gave advocating going to war in Iraq, which turns out to have been cribbed from one given by the former Australian prime minister, John Howard. (This was probably more damaging because it reminded people that a Harper government would have gone into Iraq.)

Now, Liberal leader Stéphane Dion has belatedly realized that to be competitive in this election, he needs to tell Canadians how they would fare during an economic downturn under a Dion government. His emphasis has moved from the Green Shift (although probably not far enough for many of his advisors) to the lack of a Conservative plan. Mr. Harper has a "head in the sand" approach, he said Thursday - an attack that has more resonance because the Conservatives haven't released their platform. The Liberals do have a plan - revealed in the midst of Wednesday's French debate - a five-point, 30-day program that would ensure prosperity in our time, according to the Liberal leader. It consists of lots of meetings between Prime Minister Dion and regulators, economists, Department of Finance officials and premiers.

The NDP war room, which was most nimble of all during the French debate, was quick to ask: What if first ministers tell Mr. Dion to ditch the carbon tax? As they pointed out, premiers in Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec have all questioned the carbon tax, while Ontario's Finance Minister, Dwight Duncan, said a shift in the tax burden at a time of uncertainty would be "a mistake."

Still, Mr. Dion is acknowledging a problem and promising to do something about it at a time when Mr. Harper is insisting that the land is strong. The Conservative war room said that opposition accusations about Mr. Harper's poor handling of the economy are a canard because the economy created 87,000 jobs this year, which is true. But equally true is that most private-sector forecasts suggest the unemployment rate is set to rise over the next year - to 6.6% from its current 6.1% by the middle of 2009, according to CIBC World Markets.

The good news for Mr. Harper is that he can still take aim at Mr. Dion and his carbon tax, the gift that keeps on giving. This election has come down to who can best reassure Canadians their homes and jobs are safe. Mr. Dion seems to have awoken to the fact that, when even Liberal finance ministers give your plan the puffin treatment, it is time to concede that you've made a strategic mistake. This realization could yet give Conservative strategists and candidates in marginal seats some sleepless nights as we move toward election day.

But, in all likelihood, it's too late and after the election Mr. Dion will be able to reflect on a plan drawn up in haste and repent at his leisure.

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