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Tainted meat tragedy a wild card in coming federal election: Pollster

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OTTAWA - Regardless of who's to blame for the tainted meat tragedy, the prospect of a mounting death toll in the midst of an election campaign is bound to hurt Stephen Harper's Conservatives, a pollster predicts.

Indeed, Nik Nanos said the prime minister might want to reconsider his apparent plan to pull the plug on his government next week.

"I think the Conservatives are facing enough risks in this campaign because basically (Harper's) putting his government on the line with no guarantee of success," Nanos said in an interview.

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With the death toll from Listeria linked to contaminated meat products likely to continue mounting, Nanos said the public health crisis has injected into the campaign "a wild card that's not likely to play in his favour."

Nanos said the listeriosis outbreak could have the same impact on Harper's Conservatives during the coming campaign as the income trust fiasco had on the Liberals during the 2006 election.

In the middle of the last campaign, news broke that the RCMP had launched an investigation into a possible leak of a Liberal government policy change on income trusts. The news threw the Liberals on the defensive and effectively derailed their campaign - even though all Liberals involved were eventually cleared of any wrongdoing.

In the tainted-meat affair, the Harper government is vigorously denying opposition allegations that it has cut back on funding for food inspection and turned over some responsibility for food testing to industry. And it's bluntly dismissing union criticism that inspectors are now spending more time shuffling paper work prepared by food processing companies than actually overseeing the plants.

"We are saying that's not true," Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz told a news conference Wednesday.

"There is no valid argument that there's been any cuts whatsoever to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency."

Ritz said the government pumped an extra \$113 million into food and product safety in its last budget and has hired some 200 more food inspectors, with another 58 to come by year end.

None of which may matter in the heat of an election campaign.

Just as the income trust investigation reinforced a pre-existing perception in 2006 that the Liberals were corrupt, Nanos said the listeriosis tragedy could reinforce a perception that the Tories' belief in a more hands-off government is putting the lives of Canadians at risk.

"What's occurred could lead to a broader discussion on government's role in these kind of things and it's pretty clear that the Harper government has more of a laissez-faire, self-regulatory view on a lot of these issues," he said.

"So it could leave the Conservatives vulnerable if a narrative emerges that this is an example (of what happens) when you don't have actual government inspectors and you can't rely on an industry to police itself."

Nanos said the listeriosis outbreak could be particularly damaging for the Tories in Ontario, where voters still remember the tainted water tragedy in Walkerton eight years ago.

A judicial inquiry concluded that provincial government cutbacks and a policy of privatizing water testing contributed to the Walkerton debacle, in which seven people died and more than 2,300 fell ill.

Liberal Leader Stephane Dion has already linked the tainted meat crisis to Walkerton, contending that some of the same politicians responsible for the water tragedy are now top ministers in Harper's government - Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, Environment Minister John Baird and Health Minister Tony Clement.

Liberals, Greens and New Democrats have been firing off blistering missives almost daily since the listeriosis outbreak erupted, blaming the government's approach to food safety for the crisis.

"This issue goes to the heart of what Stephen Harper is all about," Liberal agriculture critic Wayne Easter said in an interview.

"He's a prime minister in charge of governing who doesn't believe in government."

However, NDP MP Judy Wasylycia-Leis said the Harper Tories are only continuing with a flawed food safety regime that was put in place by the previous Liberal government.

It was the Liberals, she said, who slashed funding, cut hundreds of jobs and merged food protection into a single agency with food promotion - a conflict of interest she called "quite untenable."

"They've moved to a paper system whereby industry basically regulates itself. So the big loss in terms of front-line inspection happened long before the Conservatives came on board. The Conservatives are simply doing another round in the same direction."

But as they indulge in the inevitable finger-pointing, Nanos had some cautionary advice for all parties:

"All politicians have to be very careful in how they handle issues that involve the tragic death of anyone because if they are seen to kind of take advantage of that, it can really boomerang on them."

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