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Liberals must convince voters the Green Shift is not the shaft

Barbara Yaffe, Vancouver Sun

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The Green Shift carbon plan has so far failed to light the fire under the federal Liberals that the party had hoped for.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that leader Stephane Dion chose to launch his new idea in late June, just as Canadians were turning their attention to summer vacation plans. Few people were inclined to ponder Dion's policy on their camping or canoe trips.

A Harris/Decima poll last week showed the two traditional parties remain pretty well tied in support, as they have been for some time, with Conservatives at 32 per cent, Liberals 33 per cent.

While the Green Shift hasn't turned into a green shaft for the Grits, it clearly hasn't benefited them much.

Of course, new political projects do best when advertised by an articulate and dynamic spokesperson. Alas, Dion on the environment is nothing like Pierre Elliott Trudeau on the just society.

And the plan is hard to explain, as MPs who have been fanning out and hosting town hall meetings through July and August have been discovering.

It features measures to address greenhouse gas emissions through a carbon tax. But it's also a poverty reduction program, offering tax cuts aimed at northerners, the elderly, children and low-income Canadians.

Indeed, this has led some to question whether the Green Shift is more focused on social engineering than on the environment.

Liberals don't appear to have done nearly enough planning, failing to refine their political spin for the different regional constituencies to be affected by the plan.

One Liberal, Thunder Bay-Rainy River MP Ken Boshcoff, foolishly observed: "The shift will transfer wealth from rich to poor, from the oilpatch to the rest of the country."

Even more foolishly, Halton MP Garth Turner bragged that Dion "stood up once to the self-aggrandizing, hostile, me-first, greedy, macho, selfish and balkanizing separatist losers in Quebec . . . I guess he can do it again in Alberta."

Even in the absence of such incendiary comments, people in Alberta and Saskatchewan were expressing misgivings about the Green Shift. And Liberals offered them few comforting reassurances.

Nova Scotians, heavily reliant on coal, also have been left to assume they'll pay a heavier price for the Liberal plan than many other provinces.

Liberals have been unlucky, too, in their timing. The carbon tax is being pitched as energy costs have soared, playing havoc with the economy.

The Ontario branch of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation this week released a Green Shift impact analysis, asserting the proposed carbon tax "will cause a massive increase to the cost of power."

"Adding new net costs of \$1.5 billion for power in Ontario, will further damage an already struggling economy."

Others are asking whether the Green Shift will even be effective in reducing carbon emissions. That is, will the carbon tax result in businesses switching to cleaner energy sources, or will they instead resort to passing along additional carbon costs to consumers?

Pollster Nik Nanos raises another danger implicit in the policy. He notes the Green Shift is ensuring the political spotlight remains on the Liberals.