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# Religious right is back in the spotlight

By: Frances Russell

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When Prime Minister Stephen Harper's friend and former strategist Tom Flanagan says "it's just atrocious political management," his party and leader should sit up and take notice.

No stranger to the dark arts of politics, Flanagan is worried by the prime minister's apparent decision to allow his social and religious conservative base to openly flex its political muscle.

"The Tories deserve all the criticism they get if they just cut selectively according to their intuitions," Flanagan told *The National Post* after the Harper government announced it would not fund Toronto's Gay Pride Parade. Worse, he continued, the Conservatives get little benefit. They're in no danger of losing the anti-gay vote and don't have to cater to narrow interest groups to raise money.

Flanagan didn't mention the sudden reappearance of the much more explosive abortion issue, which, combined with the release last week of *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* by award-winning Toronto journalist and author Marci McDonald, is suddenly thrusting into the headlines the influence the religious right wields in the Conservative caucus, cabinet and PMO.

But if Flanagan sees danger in lifting the veil on the Conservatives' large and highly-motivated evangelical underpinning, Harper himself apparently does not, at least not now. After years of pledging that he had "no plans" to revisit the abortion issue in Canada, Harper suddenly launched his G8 maternal and child health initiative and specifically excluded abortion funding from it.

Harper must have known that decision would send a loud signal to Canada's anti-abortion-anti-feminist lobby that victory is in the wings: a reopening of the issue in Parliament through a private member's bill, the usual way Harper satisfies his theological and social conservative MPs.

Flanagan's fears that overtly catering to the religious right is a high-risk strategy seems legitimized by a new Canadian Press-Harris Decima poll released Sunday. It found that only 30 per cent of Canadians support Harper's decision to exclude abortion, down from 48 per cent in March, while 58 per cent are opposed, up from 46 per cent in March. Thirty per cent is not only a far cry from a majority government, it's several points below the Conservatives' base support.

However, Nik Nanos, head of the Ottawa-based public opinion firm, Nanos Research, doesn't see any immediate downside in Harper's assiduous, and now boldly open, courting of the religious right.

"Even if 58 per cent of Canadians are concerned about how the prime minister is handling this (the abortion

issue), that means the rest aren't sure or don't have a problem," he said in an interview. "That fits into one of the standard strategies the Conservatives have relied upon over the last number of years."

First, the religious fundamentalists' dream of a "Christian" nation stimulates his core into donating even more money. Second, the enduring fracture on the centre-left among Liberals, New Democrats, Bloc Québécois and Greens ensures indefinite vote-splitting among the two-thirds of centre-left Canadians.

"So even though something may be a majority opinion, that's not necessarily bad politics for the Conservatives who really focus a lot on wedge politics."

But most significantly, Nanos thinks Harper's blatant wooing of the religious right signals he thinks he doesn't have to worry about an election until his legislated four-year term runs out in the fall of 2012. "My take is the PM doesn't think there's going to be an election. He's looking at exclusively carving out space in this area and allowing the pro-choice forces to be divided.

"He's won two elections, it's possible for him to win a third even though it won't be a majority government."

Nanos cites a final factor at work: Harper's tacit acknowledgement that "if he isn't going to form a majority government or it isn't likely, then he's going to stick with what has been working for him, which is narrow-cast, divide Canadians, and narrow-cast, to those that align to those particular views."

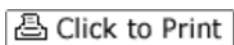
Still, Nanos does have some potent warnings for the prime minister. Canadians are fairly tolerant of each others' and their politicians' religious beliefs "as long as there isn't a perception that they're being imposed on other people with a heavy hand." But "we do know from polling in the past that the abortion debate has been a galvanizing force for voters."

In the closing days of the 2004 election, intolerant comments by some Conservative candidates about abortion and "activist" judges sent NDP voters stampeding to the Liberals, resulting in former prime minister Paul Martin winning a minority government.

Frances Russell is a Winnipeg author and political commentator.

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