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Editorials

Where's the plan?

Updated: October 4 at 08:57 AM CDT

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THERE were a few memorable moments in the political leaders' English debate Thursday, most of them involving Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Mr. Harper said his support for the war in Iraq, and for putting Canadian troops there, was a mistake premised on bad intelligence that Saddam Hussein was hoarding weapons of mass destruction in that country. He also assured Canadians that a Harper administration would never raise taxes.



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Predictably, the prime minister was on the hot seat, in both the French and English debates this week, and initial polling out of the two nights of debates indicate he and the Conservatives did not profit from the exposure. Pollster Nik Nanos found initially the party lost a little ground. That is odd, given that the debates were framed by the Conservatives as critically important to discussion of Canada's economy, the issue the Tories score highest on in the public mind. Mr. Harper himself arranged that another half hour would be attributed to economic discussion in the debates and voters might have expected some idea of which elements of the economy that need to be bolstered to meet a looming recession in America (Canada's biggest trade partner). Mr. Harper's prescription is to keep faith in the fiscal and market fundamentals that have so far buffered Canada from a broad, uncontrolled meltdown. Canadians are wondering, though, how long that can last -- this week's drop in resource and commodities stocks is causing some analysts to say that Canada's economic firewall has been breached.

Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion said that if elected prime minister, he would immediately call a meeting of financial regulators, private-sector economists and provincial leaders for an economic conference. That elicited a shot from Mr. Harper that in the face of economic uncertainty Mr. Dion should not signal panic. Rather than closing for the kill, the prime minister exposed a flank, unleashing a round of barbs, led by Green Leader Elizabeth May, who demanded to know where was the Conservative economic plan.

Ms. May, joined by NDP Leader Jack Layton, underscored the point by demanding to know where was the Conservative's broader policy platform, a standard of election campaigns. Its absence is made more conspicuous by the fact this election was launched by a minority government that claimed it needed a strong mandate to steer through the troubled financial course ahead. "Where's the platform," Mr. Layton jabbed. "Under the sweater?"

The Tories have issued a string of news releases and held a run of press conferences and photo ops to highlight plans to spend a few million here (building roads in the Greater Toronto Area) or there (developing cruise ports of call along the St. Lawrence) or tweak a bevy of tax breaks (the child fitness tax credit will become refundable; a new credit is planned for children's arts activities). The party's boldest promise yet -- to overhaul the Youth Criminal Justice Act -- would see the worst young offenders face a tougher time getting bail, and maximum life sentence for murder. There has to be more to an overhaul, but Canadians are left to imagine what.

The Tories have unveiled no substantial, new plan for a renewed government agenda. Their few election promises have not been costed out. Backed by a solemn vow not to increase taxes, Mr. Harper's spending plan is more of the same -- the party's campaign website points voters to Budget 2008.

The lack of a formal platform in the election sends the message that Mr. Harper and his minority government believe their record speaks for itself. It might be that Mr. Harper believes he has shrunk government to its appropriate size, that the fiscal imbalance has been dealt with so that provinces can deal with problems without federal help and that what we

need from a federal government in these uncertain times is steady management. But if that is what he believes, or doesn't believe, he must say so.

Having called the election, the prime minister has not revealed to Canadians why, beyond the party's own political interests, it was necessary.

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