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Harper has support to win majority

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OTTAWA - Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government is so popular with Canadians that it would be swept back into power with a majority if an election was held now, a new poll has found.

The Ipsos Reid survey, conducted for CanWest newspapers and Global National, was done over three days last week just as Harper's Tories were touting their accomplishments after 100 days in office as a minority government.

The poll found the Conservatives are enjoying their highest level of public support in nearly 20 years since Brian Mulroney's government was returned to office with a second majority victory in the November 1988 election.

"Basically what's happening is that Stephen Harper is recreating the Brian Mulroney majority," Ipsos Reid president Darrell Bricker said in an interview.

"And the way he is doing that is by breaking through in the province of Quebec. It's very much that kind of coalition Quebec and the West."

Currently, 43 per cent of Canadian voters support Harper's Conservatives, up by five percentage points since a mid-March Ipsos Reid poll.

This gives the Tories a stunning 18-point lead over their chief rival, the Liberal party, which has fallen by three percentage points and now has the support of 25 per cent of voters.

The NDP, which has slipped by four percentage points, now has the support of 15 per cent of the electorate. National support for the Bloc Quebecois remains unchanged at nine per cent. Similarly, the Green party's support, at five per cent, has not wavered.

The Ipsos Reid telephone poll of 1,003 adult Canadians was conducted May 16-18. With a sample of this size, the margin of error is 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

"People are still giving Harper a pretty good honeymoon," said Bricker. "And it just seems to be getting stronger as we move along."

Bricker said that despite potential divisiveness over some controversial Tory policies ranging from scrapping the gun registry to Canada's future military role in Afghanistan Canadians are becoming more comfortable with Harper.

"People are taking a look and they kind of like what they see. They do see him as a breath of fresh air and a significant change from the previous administration. And that's what they were voting for in the last election."

In its first 100 days, Harper's government has surprised many with its unconventional, but disciplined approach to power. The prime minister has taken remarkable chances: Inviting a Liberal turncoat, David Emerson, into his cabinet; appointing a senior Tory backroom organizer, Michael Fortier, to the Senate; embracing and even extending the military mission in Afghanistan; scrapping his promised public appointments commission when minority MPs refused to ratify his hand-picked chairman; and launching a cold war with the parliamentary press gallery over his steadfast insistence that his own staff gets to decide from a list of reporters' names who can ask questions at news conferences.

At the same time, Harper has been single-minded in his determination to focus on his government's initial five priorities: Cut taxes; get tough on crime; reduce health-care waiting times; improve political accountability; and provide more child care "flexibility" for working parents.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's budget, with its focus on cutting the GST to six per cent and providing a range of tax credits, was a political success. It's widely expected the next election will occur in the spring of 2007, after the next budget although many suspect the Tories would sorely be tempted to find a way to engineer their own parliamentary defeat before then because of their current popularity.

In the Jan. 23 election, the Conservatives won a minority government with 36 per cent of the vote. Many political experts agree that once a party increases that support to the 40 per cent range it is almost sure to get a majority. Bricker said that with its 43 per cent standing, the Tories would "absolutely" win the majority that eluded Harper earlier this year. Notably, the shifting tide in public support is occurring in three key regional battlegrounds:

- Quebec

Voters in this province, traditionally a Liberal stronghold, are turning in droves to Harper's Conservatives as the strongest federalist force. The Liberals now have the support of just 14 per cent of voters and their vote is bleeding away to Harper. The Tories now command the support of 33 per cent of Quebec voters trailing the Bloc Quebecois (at 38 per cent, unchanged) by a narrow five-point margin.

- Ontario

The Liberals are also losing ground in this vote-rich province, where the Conservatives (at 42 per cent) now lead the Liberals (at 38 per cent) while NDP support has dropped to 11 per cent.

- British Columbia

The Tories have opened up a wide gap, where they have the support of 48 per cent of B.C. voters, compared to 26 per cent for the NDP and 20 per cent for the Liberals.

Bricker said people shouldn't assume the Tories are so popular just because the Liberals are without a leader until they choose one in December.

"The reality on this is that normally in these kinds of circumstances, when the opposition isn't well defined, it's like Stephen Harper up against Mother Teresa," said Bricker.

"People compare him to the ideal instead of somebody who could be the alternate choice. But this time around it looks like Harper, particularly in Quebec, is representing the alternative."

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