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Harper's fortunes soaring in B.C.

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OTTAWA -- Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government has soared in popularity to 43 per cent from 38, according to a new Ipsos Reid poll.

In B.C., the only province where the Tories lost substantial ground in the Jan. 23 election, they are in even better shape, sitting at 48 per cent in the May 16-18 survey for CanWest/Global on voting intentions. That's up five percentage points from two months ago and well ahead of the party's 37-per-cent showing in the January election.

The poll analysed voting intentions of 1,003 Canadian adults, including 121 British Columbians. The B.C. sample size has an 8.3-per-cent error margin, 19 times out of 20. The national sample has a 3.1-per-cent margin of error.

Harper, in B.C. this week for his second visit since becoming prime minister, has taken several steps to improve his party's image after losing five seats in the province while winning a minority government on the strength of gains largely in Ontario and Quebec.

Harper pushed aggressively and successfully for an agreement-in-principle with the U.S. to end the softwood lumber dispute, cancelled the unpopular privatization of the Ridley Terminals Crown corporation in Prince Rupert, and reached out to multicultural communities by striking a judicial inquiry into the 1985 Air India terrorist bombing and negotiating redress for victims of anti-Chinese immigration laws.

His most controversial move, recruiting Liberal David Emerson, initially backfired, according to early polls. But the latest numbers strongly suggest British Columbians "have gotten over" Emerson's defection, said Ipsos Reid president Darrell Bricker.

"The people in [Emerson's riding of] Vancouver Kingsway may not have, but everyone else has moved on."

Harper will be in Vancouver Thursday to join Premier Gordon Campbell and Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan in roasting ex-MP John Reynolds, and on Friday will speak to the Victoria Chamber of Commerce.

Early indications are that Harper's B.C. strategy will be much different than that of his predecessor Paul Martin.

Martin, who in 2004 staked his political legacy on winning B.C. hearts and minds, tried to fulfil his dream of an electoral breakthrough on the West Coast by forging strong relations with Campbell and municipal mayors.

Martin in particular championed the Pacific Gateway initiative to boost transportation infrastructure, even declaring that B.C. deserves a disproportionate share of federal infrastructure dollars for the project.

Harper, while matching the \$591-million Liberal commitment to Gateway projects, has tempered B.C. demands in several areas. He resisted Victoria's plea to increase the Gateway pledge, and the new government killed the \$5-billion Kelowna accord for aboriginal Canadians, which was championed by Campbell and would have also helped B.C. disproportionately.

While the new government says it is committed to meeting key B.C. priorities such as Gateway and the 2010 Olympics, MPs stress that Ottawa is now speaking directly to the key concerns of British Columbians by bringing in tough anti-crime measures and tax cuts that will save British Columbians \$1.2 billion next year.

That reflects Harper's objective of a breakthrough in the dense and growing areas around Tory-hostile big cities, appealing to Canadians who "work hard, pay their taxes and obey the rules."

"Ultimately our first responsibility is to every-day British Columbian taxpayers who want a government in Ottawa that understands and listens to their priorities," B.C. Tory MP James Moore told The Vancouver Sun.

Pollster Greg Lyle said the Harper approach, which includes tax breaks for kids' sporting activities and \$100 a month for the parents of each young child, is smart politics.

Lyle said the appeal is aimed at the so-called soccer-mom families in areas such as Surrey, New Westminster and the North Shore ridings where the Tories hope to gain ground.

"You know who the winners are and they're real people, they're every-day people," said Lyle.

"It's not some fat cat and it's not some place that's not here. It's on my street if it's not in my house. That is the genius of his strategy."

Campbell has so far not given any indication he is concerned about the new government's different priorities, though analysts say he will inevitably have to lower his government's expectations in the post-Martin era.

"I can't think of a federal government in recent memory which was quite as bending over backwards to B.C. as [the Martin government]," said University of B.C. political scientist Philip Resnick. "By that standard Harper isn't going to be nearly as obliging."

Economist Jock Finlayson, vice-president of the B.C. Business Council, said most of the federal answers to B.C. "asks" during the Martin era "were either 'yes' and 'maybe' rather than no."

But the Harper government still remains committed to key B.C. issues like Gateway and responding to the needs of Canada's resource industries, Finlayson said. "I don't see any huge storm clouds, frankly, on the horizon and I haven't heard of any big files important to British Columbia that are going sideways," Finlayson said.

A potential concern, according to Finlayson, is talk that Harper will fix the so-called "fiscal imbalance" between Ottawa and the provinces by transferring more money to poorer provinces through the equalization program.

Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, whose province, along with Alberta, is a huge net contributor to the equalization fund, has been mostly alone in fighting this idea.

But B.C., despite being a recent recipient of equalization transfers, is moving toward being a "have" province once again and may be hurt by reforms that will only help those in the "have-not" category, according to Finlayson.

Then there are broader questions about the ramifications of B.C.'s loss of its brief status within Confederation as Canada's spoiled child. That title has once again moved back to Quebec, where Harper is pinning his hopes of a majority in the next election.

Yet analysts say if B.C. isn't at the top of the heap any more, there are some early indications -- most notably Harper's aggressive push to end the softwood dispute -- that B.C. may be next on the priority list.

"Quebec is No. 1 in the pyramid, that's absolutely clear, but B.C. is getting some pretty serious attention from these guys," said Lyle, a former Conservative insider.

UBC's Resnick said B.C., where the Tories won just 17 of 36 seats this year compared to 22 in

the 2004 election and 27 in 2000, stands to benefit if Harper feels some heat for focusing so much energy on Quebec. "There's only so far he can go with this Quebec love-in, and he's got to be careful not to alienate his own western base."

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