

HARPER'S CHALLENGE: CHANNELLING PROSPERITY AND OPTIMISM INTO VOTES

Robin V. Sears

We asked Contributing Writer Robin Sears to analyze the Nanos Poll, *The Mood of Canada*, from his perspective as a one-time political hand. As former national campaign director of the NDP, he can read his way down the field as well as anyone. What he sees here is that prosperity translates into two-thirds of Canadians saying the country is on the right track, with clear optimism that the economy will continue to improve. The problem for Stephen Harper is translating that into votes, in an era when governments don't receive as much credit for good times as they once did.

Nous avons demandé à notre collaborateur Robin Sears de mettre à profit son expérience politique pour analyser le sondage de Nik Nanos sur l'état d'esprit du Canada. Ancien directeur national de campagne pour le NPD, il s'y connaît en effet pour tâter le pouls de l'opinion. Et il constate ici que notre prospérité actuelle se traduit chez deux Canadiens sur trois par un jugement positif sur l'orientation du pays, sans parler d'un solide optimisme face à son avenir économique. Il reste à Stephen Harper à traduire le tout en suffrages, à une époque où les gouvernements reçoivent beaucoup moins facilement crédit pour leurs réalisations que par le passé.



One of the iron laws of politics is that good times produce happy voters, who re-elect governments. So governments prime every pump, grease every industry and use every tool of political black art to ensure the economy is at least stable if not booming before risking voters' judgment.

This inevitably generates waves of snarky editorials and gaggles of angrily clucking bank economists, but it usually works, so politicians endure the barracking with quiet smirks. It gets a little trickier when there is no good reason to call an election and the economic entrails are predicting bad times on the horizon. Following the first oil crisis in 1973, Pierre Trudeau was keen to go to the polls before the full impact hit Canada, and pulled off a great victory the following year. He tried to outlast the second oil crisis, waited too long and got defeated in 1979. The booms in the 1980s and 1990s helped first Mulroney and then Chrétien win their big victories in those years.

Recently, however the iron law has been looking a little wobbly, as Canadian voters have punished governments in good times and re-elected others in gloomier environments. Despite having run an inept campaign the Martin government would normally have been helped to survive by a strong economy, and wasn't. Ontario Tories were defeated and Quebec Liberals had a near-death experience despite their strong and improving economies, and reasonably happy vot-

ers. Alberta Conservatives are no doubt looking at the defeat of the Saskatchewan NDP with some anxiety. After all, the NDP went to the people in the best boom times that province has seen in a generation, and it got thumped. The parallels with their even boomier neighbour are painfully clear.

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Federal politicians today are in uncharted terrain about election timing. In addition to the normal nail-biting about when to pull the plug in a minority Parliament, we have the additional impediment of a fixed election for the first time, which sets the bar even higher for those tempted to engineer a defeat. Voters would also likely be more grumpy than usual about an unwarranted election, the third "running of the reptiles," as Michael Bate likes to put it, in four years.

All of which makes this Nik Nanos reading of the mood of the voters more fascinating. Nanos's numbers have become the "gold standard" in Canadian political polling in recent years as he has so keenly intuited the nuance of voters' mood and intention, when many others have dropped the ball, badly. In this fascinating study he paints a picture sure to cause party strategists on all sides many sleepless nights.

On the surface, the numbers are a happy vindication of the iron law. Times are very good, voters are smiling and the stars would appear to be coming into perfect election alignment. The core variable of mood in recent years, the one that strategists use as the anchor for planning, is the “right track/wrong track” test. Unless there is a competing issue — war, or constitu-

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tional, cultural or language battles — that could trump the general perception that the country is moving in the right direction, a strong thumbs-up here is usually the election call decision-maker.

The Conservatives can beam from ear to ear at this marker: An amazing two out of three Canadians think “that Canada as a country is moving in the right direction.” Only Atlantic Canadians fall much below that threshold, and even 56.3 percent of them agree. Even more surprising, given how regionally and demographically divided Canadian opinion usually is, most of us are quite cheery about the country’s personal financial prospects. Westerners are, not surprisingly, sunniest of all, with 35.6 percent seeing their personal wealth grow in the last year.

On economic performance a slight majority (52.1 percent) say they didn’t see much change in their personal finances in the year past, but nearly twice as many see themselves as better off versus worse (29.4 percent versus 15.7 percent). Employment, earnings, personal wealth, real estate values are all near peak levels. Given our typical caution and reticence about appearing overconfident, it is surprising that nearly one out of two (49.3 percent) of us think even better times are ahead for the economy as a whole.

Again Atlantic Canada is the outlier, at 24.2 percent saying they are better off, but an even higher number of them, three out of five, say there has been no change. Women here are more cautious (33.5 to 25.4 percent) about personal finances than men. While that is a normal gender difference, it creates a small shadow for Tories given their ongoing gender gap problem. Similarly, age 40-to-

49 voters see the past year in a darker light, perhaps as they are facing high family expenditures and high layoff anxiety.

For at least a generation Canadian political elites have judged the health of the country as a function of how well our governments play with each other. Their obsession with federal-provincial relations — the endless struggle for cash and power between Ottawa, the provinces and recently cities as well — causes many observers from less navel-gazing political cultures to scratch their heads.

For many years, while Canada was supposedly on the verge of splitting apart, many voters were persuaded that instead of a healthy functioning society, with a booming economy, drawing talent from around the world, Canada was a sick, doddering community with a short, dim future.

The early warning sign of how close to collapse we were in any given month was the rise or fall in separatist support in Quebec, often also framed in terms of perceptions of federal-provincial conflict. Nanos reveals another sign that those days of destructive political narcissism may be fading. In a sample of Canadians where two out of three say the country is on the right track, only 16.3 percent see some or great improvement in federal-provincial relations!

Hallelujah! Most of us now believe that Canada can thrive and its people

prosper, even if its governments cannot stop squabbling. In Quebec, a slightly greater number than nationally (18.9 versus 16.3 percent) think things have gotten better, which might be troubling to Conservatives who have invested so much in attempting to implement their own version of an “open federalism” and an open hand to former Bloc Québécois supporters. But wait — these same

Quebec voters believe even more strongly than the country as a whole that Canada is “moving in the right direction” (67.8 versus 65.8 percent). They also believe by almost two to one that the economy will get stronger (38.4 versus 20.8 percent).

In other words, Ottawa and Quebec City may squabble, but Quebec voters’ judgment of the management of the country is increasingly based on broader and more relevant criteria today. Not surprisingly, the resource revenue-sharing and equalization battles between Ottawa and the Atlantic provinces produce the highest levels of pessimism on the federal-provincial front, with a clear majority saying things are moving in the wrong direction.

The offshore accord battle clearly damaged the Harper government’s currency with Atlantic Canada voters, and those wounds have yet to heal. However, Atlantic Canadians agree by roughly the same percentages about the country’s financial prospects as other Canadians. How this will impact their voting intentions is therefore less clear than the “Danny Williams at War” headlines might appear to portend.

Curiously, westerners do not seem to be much moved by the power their representatives now hold in Ottawa, from the Prime Minister to his deputy PM in all but name, Jim Prentice, to a series of powerful BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba ministers. They differ from the rest of Canada by less than the margin of error

on "the right track," Canada's economic prospects and federal-provincial relations. The thin reed this might offer New Democrats and Liberals is that voters are unimpressed by the impact of the "West in power" in Ottawa and are therefore open to other political offers.

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The most eyebrow-raising numbers in a dataset filled with surprising insights are in the international domain. Nearly half of all Canadians (48.3 percent) believe that the country's international reputation has improved over the past year. In a year when the government has been pummelled over its Afghanistan commitments almost daily, when Canadians have been subject to the sight of convoys of flag-draped coffins slowly moving the bodies of young Canadian servicemen to their graves for the first time in more than half a century, this is, to put it mildly, unexpected.

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One might quibble that Canadians could be aware that we have won greater international respect with a more robust foreign policy in the Middle East, with China and against terrorism, but they personally don't support it. One could even argue that, new global respect or not, Canadians could still punish the government for its tougher and less "diplomatic" stance on a variety of international files, from Lebanon to Sri Lanka to Armenian genocide. If the situation in Kandahar deteriorates, the Canadian body count rises and the debate over mission extension gets ugly again, these numbers could sag quickly.

A more likely analysis is the simplest one: Ordinary Canadians, unlike Canadian foreign policy experts or opposition politicians, support this government's vision of a more ideologically and philosophically disciplined approach to foreign relations. In the home of the "great Canadian compromise," somewhat surprising indeed. Again, the Quebec numbers are intriguing.

By only a small margin does this, our allegedly most "pacifist" province, differ from the rest of Canada (45.6 versus 48.3 percent)

This finding, that Canadians appear pleased with the Harper government's foreign policy, is very bad news for the NDP and for the Bloc, each of whom has been counting on a large chunk of its target voters being movable by very tough messages on Afghanistan. It is not much more encouraging for the Liberals as it appears as if the Conservatives are close to passing the "competence test" on the international dossier, just as they clearly have on the constitutional file in the eyes of a majority of Canadians. If the finding is sustained, the Liberals' exclusive ownership of the "natural party governing" brand is over.

A small cloud on the government's political horizon may be developing in Ontario. By a small percentage Ontarians see less improvement than the rest of Canada in their personal finances (26.2 percent of Ontarians say they are better off versus 29.4 percent of all Canadians) while they recognize that the country's

prospects are still climbing. They are also somewhat more underwhelmed by federal-provincial relations than other Canadians (12.8 versus 16.3 percent see improvement). On every other measure Ontario lines up with national thinking.

Women and young Canadians differ from men and their seniors on a number of issues, but the partisan impact is hard to draw clearly. There is a 6 to 8 percent difference between men and women on "the right track" and "personal finances," for example. But no difference at all on "Canada's economy will be stronger" or federal-provincial relations. Young Canadians tend to be more optimistic on every issue, not surprisingly, given the invulnerability of youth.

Seniors, often gloomier on a variety of issues given the disappointment of experience and the dampening impact of reflections on mortality, are not so here. On Canada's international reputation they are more ebullient than everyone, except the youngest Canadians, with nearly 52 percent saying we have moved up. Canadians 18 to 29 agree.

One might argue that in a booming resource economy whose dollar has moved from "basket case" to "global reserve currency" almost overnight, why shouldn't one see such confidence? But one feature of these data is certainly new, and that is their regional and demographic uniformity. This may be another sign that Michael Adams, author of *Fire and Ice* and a socio-economic polling guru of an earlier generation, is right in his contention that Canadians are becoming more homogeneous despite our apparent fascination with our regional and ethnic identities. Adams also contends that Canadians share less and less with an American value system. The apparent support for Canada's move from a peacekeeping role to an aggressive

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Jason Ransom, PMO

Prime Minister Harper in the House of Commons. His challenge is to translate the country's buoyant mood as reflected in the Nanos-Policy Options poll into voting intentions for his Conservatives.

peace enforcement role in Afghanistan may raise questions about at least one element of that claim.

The partner to “the right track” in any political strategist’s research temperature taking is government approval. This is the punchline in these data for the Harper government. More than twice as many Canadians give them a “good” or “very good” score as opposed to those who fail them at “poor” or “very poor” (39.5 versus 18.4 percent). For a minority government whose partisan support has struggled to rise beyond the mid-30s this will be encouraging news indeed. Again hopeful Liberals and New Dems might argue that it has a perverse negative perspective: “Even though we like what you’re doing, we aren’t going to vote for you.” But set against the other indirect approval measures in these numbers, that’s a stretch.

The Harper Tories still suffer a significant gender gap (12.2 percent of

men versus 8.1 percent of women rank them as very good). Their ratings in Atlantic Canada are weak, and even in the West they do not score as highly as the national numbers. Ontario is less enthused about them with 21.9 percent saying “bad job” versus 18.4 nationally. They are weaker among the young, and stronger among seniors — but seniors outvote youth two to one. Their deficits are almost all in single digits on every issue, in every demographic and across all regions — not a daunting gap to make up given Canadian voter volatility.

Given our curmudgeonly view of governments and their performance, which often translates into eye-popping partisan volatility, there is a downside to these data. We know from other studies that many of these positive reviews come from first-time Tory voters, a group whose loyalties are not unshakable. They are voters who have

come from other political families and might be persuaded to return.

There are also darkening clouds on Canada’s economic horizon, the weakness of the American economy and our booming dollar’s impact on Canadian exports chief among them. If the iron law of politics retains any power, fear of tougher times could shift these sunny voters’ mood dramatically. The good news for the government is that Canadians appear to be giving them at least a C+ to a B on performance to date. The bad news is that the mood of Canadians — and the Tories, next report card — could be much worse as a result of factors far beyond their ability to control.

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