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## Harper's hopes fading

### Goal of majority further from reach

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If this keeps up, Stephen Harper can kiss his hopes for a majority in the next election goodbye and, with them, his dream of turning the Conservatives into Canada's natural governing party.

It would be bad enough for the minority government if today's EKOS poll only confirmed its failure to thrive in voting intentions. At the national level, the Conservative score of 36 per cent basically mirrors the results of the last election.

That's despite the fact that the Prime Minister has had the stage almost exclusively to himself all summer and that he has been pounding away at new policy announcements since the return of Parliament.

It's also despite the fact that the Liberals are still leaderless and that their campaign, according to the same poll, has failed to engage one in two voters and to produce a popular front-runner.

On that particular score, the poll results are at best a mixed bag. The Liberals may be having a four-way race to the top but for the Canadian public, their campaign is primarily a two-way contest between Bob Rae and Michael Ignatieff, with Gerard Kennedy and Stéphane Dion making up a somewhat distant second tier.

And while Rae emerges as the favourite for Liberal leader, it is Ignatieff whom poll respondents find more likely to bring the Liberals to victory in an election. Those contradictory findings could be a sign that when respondents of all political persuasions select their preferred choice, they sometimes do so on the basis of their own partisan interest, by looking for the leader least likely, at least in their minds, to do their own party damage, rather than with an eye to the best chances of the Liberals.

But if the Liberals, based on the tepid public response to their leadership campaign, are not holding the Conservatives back, then it follows that the government is failing to build efficiently on its gains from the last election through its own actions or lack of them.

Indeed, even with the same score as last January, the Conservatives are probably further from their goal of a majority than they were on the morning after the last election, and certainly more removed from it than at the peak of their honeymoon last spring.

In Quebec, the bottom is falling out from under Harper. His party has now dropped to third place, well behind the Bloc Québécois (44 per cent) and four points behind the Liberals (21 per cent).

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With their support at 17 per cent, the Tories would be hard-pressed to get their 10 Quebec MPs re-elected, let alone win new seats. Their current standing is a full eight points below their score in the last election.

Quebec is also the only province where a solid majority feels that the government is not moving in the right direction, another sign that the Conservative audience in the province is slipping away quickly.

As bad as they are, these numbers cannot be news to the government. Tory strategists are no less addicted to focus groups and public opinion surveys than their predecessors in power.

In fact, it could well be that some Harper strategists have already given up on Quebec. How else to explain the spate of policy announcements and pronouncements of the past few weeks? If the government had wanted to run its prospects down in Quebec, it could hardly have achieved its purpose more quickly than by insisting on its plan to do away with the long-gun registry on the heels of a deadly shootout at Dawson College in Montreal, the abandonment this week of any pretence that climate change is a federal priority, the elimination of a variety of initiatives such as the court challenges and the literacy programs that have long stricken chords in Quebec and the recent musings about a defence of religions act.

Nor is there any sense that those measures — even as they echo negatively in Quebec — resonate loudly outside the core Conservative base elsewhere in Central Canada.

On the contrary, even as the minority government is bombing its own Quebec beachhead, it is also failing to make up for the ground it sacrifices in that province with gains in Ontario. And that, no matter how you look at it, makes Harper's current approach a self-defeating strategy.

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