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## Afghan mission, environment dog Tories

**War is `problem area,' pollster says**

**But Senate reform could be a `winner'**

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BRUCE CAMPION-SMITH

OTTAWA BUREAU

ottawa—The federal Conservatives are dogged by the public's lack of enthusiasm for Canada's Afghanistan mission and skepticism over their pledge to improve the environment, a *Toronto Star* poll reveals.

But Prime Minister Stephen Harper has a "winner" with his proposal for an elected Senate and should keep pitching that plan to a receptive public, pollster Frank Graves says.

"I found that result surprising," said Graves, president of EKOS Research. "Of the things they've been talking about lately, this is one that gets real clear enthusiasm from most Canadians."

Yet big issues remain a problem for the Tories. The poll reveals that the federal government has had little luck turning around public attitudes toward the Afghan mission. Despite recent efforts to highlight Canadian redevelopment efforts in the Kandahar region, public support continues to sag.

The poll showed that just 36 per cent of Canadians back the dangerous mission in southern Afghanistan, where 40 soldiers have been killed already. That's down 2 points from an EKOS poll done just a few weeks ago.

However, public opposition to the mission has softened as well — down to 45 per cent from 49 per cent. And people with no opinion grew to 18 per cent, up from 12 per cent, indicating that more Canadians are growing "reflective" about Canada's role in Afghanistan, Graves said.

"This thing is stuck in a problem area for them right now. I don't see any evidence of recovery of confidence," he said. "Clearly the long-term pattern is one of eroding public support."

And Graves says the poll suggests that the Afghan issue is now starting to cost the Conservatives support in Quebec, bad news for a party that needs to make inroads in the province.

"I do think this is causing some damage in Quebec," he said.

That only boosts pressure on the government to develop an environmental plan that can win over Quebec residents "since they're taking a lot of damage on the Afghanistan issue there," he said.

Until the Tories convince Canadians they have a credible environmental plan, they're not likely to win a

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majority government, said Graves. "Stephen Harper and the Conservatives are not seen as championing the environment or environmental problems," he said.

"If they're going to get a majority government, they have to have this issue covered off in a more plausible fashion," Graves said in an interview yesterday.

That's bad news for Harper, who this week launched the first stage of his government's green strategy at a news conference in Vancouver. Flanked by senior ministers, Harper revealed plans to introduce a Clean Air Act to regulate toxic chemicals and greenhouse gases.

But Harper's statement was met with a "universal raspberry" from stakeholders and experts, and so far has had little resonance with Canadians, Graves said.

That was reflected in the poll results, where almost half of respondents — 46 per cent — this week said they only had "low" confidence in the Conservatives' ability to tackle environmental concerns. Another 57 per cent said they had "moderate confidence." Just 7 per cent said they have high confidence.

"It's too early to judge but clearly skepticism outweighs enthusiasm by a significant margin," Graves said. "It shows that they have a tough challenge ahead of them."

On the up side, Graves said, few Canadians have confidence in any of the political parties to bring in environmental improvements. "The Liberals are not seen as having a particularly distinguished record either."

On the other big international issue, the poll shows 45 per cent of Canadians favour diplomatic talks as an appropriate response to North Korea's announcement this week that it had conducted a nuclear test. Another 42 per cent favour either targeted economic sanctions or a total political and economic embargo. Only 6 per cent favour military intervention by the international community.

The one bright spot for the Conservatives in the poll numbers is Harper's plan for Senate reform, which is "surprisingly attractive" for many Canadians, despite the "almost insurmountable" constitutional hurdles, Graves said.

Sixty per cent said it is time for Ottawa to "get going" on reforming the unelected Senate, the poll found. Just 35 per cent thought it would be a waste of time and energy.

The government has already introduced legislation to limit Senate terms to eight years. Harper told a Senate committee last month that legislation is being drafted to allow Canadians to elect would-be senators, perhaps as soon as the next time the country goes to the polls.

The EKOS survey sampled 1,211 Canadians between Oct. 10 and Oct. 12 and is considered accurate within 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.



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