

Refugee crisis less damaging to Conservatives than coverage suggests: Innovative Research poll

'It's not doing the damage that some people might have thought,' says pollster Greg Lyle of Innovative Research.



The Hill Times photo by Andrew Meade

Though he's taking a beating in the press, the Syrian refugee crisis isn't doing as much damage to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, pictured last week in Saint John, N.B., and the Conservatives as some people might have thought.

By **MARK BURGESS** | Sept. 11, 2015

Despite the media focus on the Syrian refugee crisis and calls for the Conservatives to respond more compassionately, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's party isn't badly positioned on the issue and it could even present an opportunity, a new survey shows.

"It's not doing the damage that some people might have thought," pollster Greg Lyle of Innovative Research told *The Hill Times*.

After almost two weeks of the Syrian refugee crisis dominating the news, roughly one-quarter of Canadian voters say they are following it very closely, and 38 per cent say they're less likely to vote Conservative on Oct. 19 as a result. Another 41 per cent are following it somewhat closely, the online survey from Innovative Research conducted Sept. 4-10 showed.

That number—38 per cent—of voters less likely to vote Conservative as a result of the crisis is not very big given the number that say they wouldn't vote for Stephen Harper was already higher than that, Mr. Lyle said.

The survey also showed Canadians are confused about whether the family of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose drowned body was photographed earlier this month on a Turkish beach, had been refused refugee status in Canada. Roughly one-third of respondents think the family did seek refugee status and was refused, while another third think that story is false and 35 per cent have no firm view either way.

News reports on Sept. 2 said the boy's family, all of whom died fleeing across the Mediterranean except for the father, Abdullah Kurdi, had been denied refugee status in Canada. It later turned out, and was reported on Sept. 3, that it was the boy's uncle, Mohammed Kurdi, who had applied.

NDP MP Fin Donnelly faced some criticism for his role in the story. Mr. Donnelly told CBC that he had handed the Kurdi's application and a letter to Immigration Minister Chris Alexander last winter. While the letter described the situation of both families, the application, which was rejected, was only for Mohammed Kurdi.

Mr. Lyle said the survey shows a "fundamental misperception" about the family.

The Liberals rated highest as the party that would best handle the refugee crisis, with 33 per cent saying they would do much better or somewhat better. The NDP was second at 28 per cent but the Tories weren't far behind at 26 per cent.

"This doesn't have to be a bad issue for the Tories," he said. "If it hadn't been for the fact that it broke with a story that wasn't true, the Tories might actually be doing even better on this issue. As time goes on and the misperception fades, the potential for the Tories to actually make something on this issue is real."

Almost 40 per cent of Canadians feel Canada is doing less than most other countries to help Syrian refugees, while 32 per cent said we're doing about the same and 13 per cent believe we're doing more than most countries.

Only 51 per cent of respondents support increasing the number of Syrian refugees accepted into Canada and only 49 per cent want to make the

process faster and easier.

Support is highest among Liberal and NDP supporters, while 47 per cent of "Time for Change" Conservatives—those critical voters who say it's time for a change but that the Conservatives are best able to run government—said they would support taking more.

After being dogged on the campaign trail over the issue, Mr. Harper suggested last week that he would soon be introducing changes to the Conservative position on accepting refugees. But Mr. Lyle said some of the numbers in the survey suggest the issue could still be to the Conservatives' advantage.

Forty-two per cent said they support increasing Canada's military involvement to defeat ISIS as a way of dealing with the refugees while 33 per cent advocated withdrawing military and focusing on humanitarian aid.

Support for more military involvement exceeds overall Conservative support in the polls and no other party supports Canada's mission against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

"If they could polarize the election around Canada's military involvement there, it would do really well for them," Mr. Lyle said.

The survey shows a plurality want only a humanitarian solution to the crisis (32 per cent) compared to 18 per cent who want a military-only solution. Another 17 per cent prefer a joint solution, while 14 per cent prefer an isolationist approach and 19 per cent are ambivalent or disengaged.

Broken down by party, 49 per cent of New Democrats and 47 per cent of Liberals prefer a humanitarian-only solution, with 14 per cent and 17 per cent wanting a joint solution, respectively. For Conservatives, 43 per cent want a military-only solution; 25 per cent want a joint solution and only nine per cent want a humanitarian-only solution to the refugee crisis.

The crisis barely registers on the list of most important issues for leaders to address, at four per cent. Stable economic management, creating jobs, health care, and open and accountable government remain at the top, all getting 23 to 24 per cent when first and second most-important issues are combined.

NDP supporters are most likely to put the refugee crisis as a top-two priority (eight per cent), compared to six per cent of Liberals, five per cent of Greens and two per cent of Conservatives.

Among decided voters, the Innovative survey showed the NDP continuing to lead overall, for the third consecutive month, at 31 per cent, with the Liberals closing in at 30 per cent and the Conservatives at 28 per cent.

The online survey of 2,121 Canadians was conducted Sept. 4-10 and the sample is weighted to reflect overall population. A margin of error can't be calculated as online surveys aren't random probability based samples.

mburgess@hilltimes.com

The Hill Times