

Meanwhile, the Conservatives have to be asking themselves how long this streak of misfortune can continue.



By [GREG LYLE](#) | Sept. 13, 2015

VANCOUVER, B.C.—Since our last survey two weeks ago, a new online poll of 2,121 Canadians by Innovative Research Group Inc. shows the Liberals have gained three percentage points while the NDP dropped two and the Conservatives one. These are not very big changes, so can we read much into them?

What we should not be doing is exaggerating the change in the overall picture. The Conservatives are now running third nationally, but when only three points separate first from third, the race is essentially tied.

Although not much has changed overall, there are some significant underlying trends.

One key story is regional. As I have noted before, we count seats on election night, not votes. Anything we can do to get closer to what is happening in individual ridings helps us better understand where things will end up on election night. Two weeks ago Ontario was a three-way race with the Conservatives at 32 per cent, the Liberals at 31 per cent and the NDP at 30 per cent. That picture has now changed quite dramatically with the Liberals now solidly in the lead at 39 per cent, the Tories 11 points behind at 28 per cent and the NDP at 26 per cent.

Another key story is what is happening to the Liberal Party image. The Liberals began the election with a weak brand. They had no single strong brand attribute to anchor a recovery. Over the past five weeks, their gains include:

- Up 6 points as best at representing Canada in the world;
- Up 6 points for best on the economy;
- Up 7 points for best on creating jobs;
- Up 7 points on understanding the needs of people like me;
- Up 7 points on having a vision for the future;
- Up 11 points as best at protecting the middle class.

These are significant gains that provide a strong foundation to support even bigger increases in the vote. Moreover, these gains don't appear to be happenstance. They directly reflect Liberal messaging and ads, which indicates a campaign team that is effectively developing and implementing strategy.

Not only have the Liberals re-built their party brand, they have rehabilitated their leader as well. When the election began, Justin Trudeau had as many unfavourables as favourables. It appeared the Conservatives had defined their third Liberal leader following the successful negative branding of Stéphane Dion and Michael Ignatieff. But that has turned around dramatically over the past five weeks and Trudeau has now dropped seven points in unfavourables while gaining 11 percentage points in favourables. This is a remarkable turnaround over five weeks given the Conservatives were still targeting Trudeau with a heavy negative ad buy.

On his underlying leadership brand, Trudeau shows a bigger mix of gains and continued vulnerability. The big win for Trudeau has been an

eight-point gain on represents positive change. He now leads at 28 per cent with Mulcair four points behind at 24 per cent. Trudeau is up six points on best plan for the future, which is now essentially a three-way tie with Harper at 23 per cent, Trudeau at 21 per cent and Mulcair at 20 per cent. Trudeau is up four points on stands for what I believe, leading at 22 per cent with Harper right behind at 21 per cent and Mulcair at 19 per cent.

For all the Liberal successes to date, the other parties are not just going away. Harper and Mulcair still enjoy one key advantage over Trudeau: both Mulcair (28 per cent) and Harper (25 per cent) enjoy large leads over Trudeau (16 per cent) on competence. And competence is a critical factor in vote choice. That Mulcair beats Trudeau on competence is significant. That Mulcair beats Harper is striking. For a Prime Minister with 10 years in office to lose on competence to a former provincial cabinet minister is a rare event.

It is hard to find good news for the Tories in our latest numbers. The Conservatives could be forgiven if they thought the winds of public debate might blow a little more favourably once the Duffy trial was behind them. However, that is just not the case. Over six in 10 heard something about the Conservatives recently and almost half were left feeling less favourable. This is almost exactly what we found two weeks ago.

What has changed is what people are hearing. A third mention Syria and 15 per cent mention the past weekend's candidate controversies.

The whole issue about the candidate peeing in a coffee cup is gold for social media and coffee chatter. Well over half of our respondents (60 per cent) had heard about the issue. What is alarming rather than simply embarrassing for the Conservatives is that 51 per cent say it is a symptom of deeper problems. Only 40 per cent say it was a unique problem unlikely to be repeated. While this is not a major problem in the Tory base, 35 per cent of the Time for a Change Tories (a key target vote segment) say this is a symptom of deeper problems.

Syria is looked at more deeply elsewhere in this edition of The Hill Times, but on this issue the Conservatives have cause to complain about media coverage. More than three-in-10 (31 per cent) respondents following the Syria issue think the government turned down a refugee application from the family of the child in the iconic photo. Looking past that misperception, we find public attitudes are much more complex than might be expected from the initial media and public reaction. The Conservative position of both military and humanitarian support has appeal to more Canadians than are currently voting Conservative, so the governing party can actually grow its support on that issue.

As these event-driven headlines recede, there is a high likelihood that the economy will regain the centre stage. Attention to coverage of the recession has grown from 59 per cent two weeks ago to 67 per cent now. More people are now certain we are in a recession (24 per cent to 31 per cent) and most of the rest (44 per cent) believe we are probably in one.

Most Canadians (53 per cent) are looking for active government involvement in the economy, but 34 per cent think government can help the best by reducing taxes and red tape. If the Liberals, NDP, Bloc and Greens are fighting over the 54 per cent, the Conservatives can win by rallying the support of the 34 per cent minority view.

However, right now it is the Liberals that have momentum on the issue. The number of respondents who say the Liberals are best able to deal with a recession has grown from 25 per cent to 29 per cent in the past two weeks. Liberal gains have come at the expense of the NDP who have dropped from 25 per cent to 21 per cent. The Conservatives are stable at 28 per cent. However, that means they are missing at least six per cent of the electorate who prefer a small government approach.

As we enter the second half of the campaign, the Liberals should be feeling good. They have set and met key goals when it comes to moving public opinion. They have contested the Tory machine efforts to define their leader and they have won. However, they have yet to fully engage the NDP machine. Can the NDP succeed where the Tories failed and roll back Liberal gains?

The NDP retain several key advantages. First, they dominate in Quebec with a core block of seats that gives the NDP a head start on the Liberals. Second, Mulcair has a key strength in competence, which is a fundamental test of potential prime ministers. The big question for the next poll is: will the new NDP ads be able to use their leader's brand strength to regain some momentum?

The Conservatives have to be asking themselves how long this streak of misfortune can continue. They need not fear the substantive issues of Syria and the recession. More people support their policies than support their party. It is not the policies holding them back. It does appear that going with the same format for three different attacks on Trudeau was a mistake. While each ad tested well, people thought they had already seen the new ads. This may mean that the impact of the second and third ad was reduced because people stopped paying attention once they thought they recognized the ad. The Conservatives appear to have recognized that mistake as their new Trudeau attack ad uses a new format. However, it might help if the Conservatives give people something to vote for and not just something to vote against.

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