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The Election this Week -- Dispatch from the Campaign Trail

A Campaign about Ideas... Who Would Have Thought?

Ottawa – On Wednesday, December 7, 2005, the Public Policy Forum held the first of a series of weekly breakfast panel discussions on the federal election campaign. Gathered at the National Press Club, participants heard from SES Research President Nikita James Nanos, Carleton University Professor Chris Waddell and PPF President Jodi White on the first week of campaigning: the numbers, the events, and the issues.

First, the numbers: According to the CPAC-SES daily tracking poll, support for the major parties has returned to the levels of June 2004, following a brief drop in the polls for the Liberals caused by the release of Justice Gomery's first report on November 1. Nanos reported that, in the last several weeks, the rise and fall in Liberal support has mirrored the attention focused on Gomery. However, in many ways, the election campaign has changed the channel on the Gomery report – clearly to the Liberals' benefit.

With regards to the leaders, most leaders have seen their 'Best PM' rating hold relatively steadily over the course of the first week of the campaign, with Martin in the lead (28%), followed by Harper (20%) and Duceppe (5%). Jack Layton, however, has seen his numbers decline from 16 percent on November 13 to 10 percent in early December.

Panelists also discussed the dynamics that set in after a week of campaigning. Interestingly, the parties' strategies seemed to converge around two basic questions. First, is this campaign about competing visions of the role of government? And secondly, is this campaign in some way a referendum on differing approaches to the national unity issue?

At least from the point of view of ideas, Stephen Harper's Conservatives have clearly been setting the agenda, with major policy announcements ranging from the GST to childcare to healthcare reform. But questions were raised as to why those announcements – whom most agreed were positive – had not yet caused a change in support for the Tories. Part of the answer seemed to be time; not enough of it had passed for the announcements to make an impact. Part of it was also a function of the dominant media frame around the Tory Leader that seems to have set in since the last election; it would just take more time for Canadians to change their perception of Harper and decide to support him. In this respect, the duration of the campaign was seen as being of benefit to Harper.

The Liberals spent much of the first week reacting to the Tory policy announcements, but the panel agreed they did so to some positive effect. Debates about how best to provide childcare, or which taxes should be cut, overshadowed the issue of ethics and scandal –

and that could only be good for the Liberals. There were some questions raised about the pace of the Liberal campaign so far, but the prediction is that Team Martin is simply biding its time until the sprint from New Year's Day to Election Day. More questions were raised about the decision to make national unity a central campaign issue. While most agreed the strategy had a chance of success, many felt uneasy about the fact that no one really knows for sure how that would end.

Similarly, the decision by the Bloc Québécois to feature newly-elected PQ Leader André Boisclair so prominently in its campaign effort was thought to have the potential to be a double-edged sword. To achieve the desired break-through, it was felt that Gilles Duceppe should probably have downplayed sovereignty and focused on 'delivering for all Quebecois.'

With regards to the NDP, it seemed that Jack Layton had succeeded, in the lead-up to the election, to reclaim traditional NDP ground, both in terms of issues and geography. However, Layton finds himself in a difficult position after week 1 in that the emerging two-way race makes it difficult for a third leader to be heard. As Buzz Hargrove's announcement proved, there is a significant risk that strategic voting may be a challenge for the NDP this time as well.

Interestingly, however, was the observation shared by all panelists that, to everyone's surprise, this first week on the campaign trail was about ideas. As Chris Waddell remarked, this election might actually turn out to be a debate on the role of government in the lives of citizens. Whether it is in childcare or healthcare, there is an emerging 'big picture' difference between the Liberal and Tory views of what government is about. So far, the Liberals have offered a vision of government as a direct provider of a host of essential services to citizens. In contrast, the Conservatives have taken a 'government does not necessarily know best' approach, as they believe Canadians are happier to look after themselves when they can. The campaign could still take a negative turn, as most pundits had predicted, but for the first time in many years, there is an emerging distinct electoral choice being put before voters.

Looking ahead, our panel agreed that no trends had really been set in this campaign, and likely would not until the sprint to the finish line in January. There is a lot of voter volatility out there. In the end, party fortunes – and the political survival of Paul Martin and Stephen Harper – could rest on factors such as voter turnout in specific regions, organization strength on the ground in key ridings, or even the weather in certain regions on voting day.

The Public Policy Forum would like to thank the following organizations for their support for this breakfast series:

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The next breakfast panel discussion will be held on Thursday, December 15, 2005, at the National Press Club, located on the second floor of the Booth Building, 165 Sparks Street, in downtown Ottawa. To register, or for more information, please contact Dianne Gravel-Normand at dianne.gravel@ppforum.ca or visit us online at www.ppforum.ca.