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The Election this Week -- Dispatch from the Campaign Trail

Have the Liberals Lost their Base? Will the Tories Lose their Way?

Ottawa – While the federal election race tightened slightly last week, experts at the Public Policy Forum’s election breakfast still expected a Tory victory on Jan. 23. Few were prepared to venture a guess as to the size of that victory, but it seemed there was little the parties could do in the time remaining to change the outcome of Monday’s vote, they said.

Held at the National Press Club on Thursday, Jan. 19, the Forum panel featured SES Research president Nik Nanos, Toronto Star national affairs columnist Jim Travers, Globe and Mail parliamentary bureau chief Brian Laghi, and Bill Neville, who has spent his entire career within the Canadian political and government process and served three prime ministers in different capacities.

SES polling conducted in the week prior to the Forum’s event showed a slight narrowing of the Tory lead nationally, with the Conservatives garnering the support of approximately 37 per cent of decided Canadians to the Liberals’ 30. In Ontario, the race turned into a statistical tie between the two major parties, with the Tories at 40 per cent and the Liberals at 39.

The story of the election - at least from a pollster’s point of view - remained the drastic changes in party support in Quebec. SES data showed the Conservatives had tripled their support in *la belle province* since the start of the election, while the Liberals had sunk to levels the party had never registered before. The Bloc Québécois, whose leader had mused about breaking the 50 per cent barrier in popular support a few short weeks ago, saw its support erode in recent weeks to the benefit of the Conservatives. For the Bloc, even meeting its previous record for popularity of 48.8 per cent in 2004 had come to seem very much in doubt. In what would have been considered a virtual impossibility as recently as New Year’s Day, the Conservatives stood to elect a handful of Quebec MPs to the 39th Parliament.

Strategic voting is the story of the election in Toronto, Travers said. Having followed Liberal star candidate Michael Ignatieff, Travers said Liberal candidates were measuring their progress by the number of NDP supporters they could persuade to switch their allegiance in order to stop the Conservatives. The battle for Toronto had shrunk to the zone defined by the city’s central 416 area code, with the Liberals all but conceding the

suburban 905 zone to the Conservatives, Travers added. Put simply, he said, it could not get worse.

Laghi's report also focused on the dynamics of the campaign in the Greater Toronto Area, and in other urban areas across Canada. Remarking that the Liberal campaign in the last week had retreated to the cities of Toronto and Montreal, he wondered whether the Liberals had any geographical base left anywhere in the country. While the Conservatives' hold on the West seemed impenetrable, and the Bloc continued to dominate Quebec, the Liberals in 2006 had been forced to fight to hold onto seats they had never worried about in past elections. All panelists agreed this could have a significant impact on the Liberal Party's ability to rebuild in the post-election period.

Turning to aftermath of a Conservative victory on election night, Neville reflected on the transition to a Harper government. Having advised two prime ministers on their transition efforts, Neville walked participants through some of the major phases involved in such a process.

His first word of advice to any prime minister, he said, would be simple: don't rush into anything. The decisions regarding the size and structure of cabinet would affect every aspect of the new government's performance. In the last 50 years, new governments have been sworn in between 10 and 14 days after an election. Should he emerge as prime minister-elect, Harper should take the time he needs before heading to Rideau Hall for the swearing-in ceremony, Neville said.

Harper should also resist the temptation to make major changes to the structures of the government right away, Neville added, and he should identify six to eight key cabinet positions and fill them with the most experienced and talented candidates, taking into account other considerations to fill the remaining spots. In this respect, Neville suggested that Harper would have to assign roles to prominent former Progressive Conservatives, such as current deputy leader Peter MacKay, and senators Hugh Segal and Marjory LeBreton.

Finally, all panelists agreed that the relationship between the Harper government and senior public servants will be a critical determinant of the longevity of the government. Referring to Harper's comments about the neutrality of the public services as his only real gaffe of the campaign, panelists urged the Tories to rid themselves of the 'us and them' mentality when it comes to the public service. Again referring to the early Mulroney years, Neville remarked that the cabinet ministers who succeeded in that first government were usually those who found a way to work with their departments, while those who didn't were usually those who couldn't get past the mistrust. Changes to the public service may well be needed, all conceded, but the government's attitude toward the public service must be a positive one – or the government risks losing its way.

Given the popularity of this breakfast series, the Public Policy Forum is assessing interest in holding a final 'election debrief' session on Thursday, January 26, 2006, 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. Register now.

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

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