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The Election this Week -- Dispatch from the Campaign Trail

*Will the Liberals Weather the Battle?
Will Canadians Battle the Weather?*

Ottawa – Paul Martin’s tough talk, Stephen Harper’s smooth talk and the possibility that Canadians would prefer shopping malls or office parties to televised leaders’ debates dominated the conversation at the Public Policy Forum’s second election breakfast, December 15.

The 60-minute panel discussion and question period at the National Press Club reflected a growing sense that it is still early in the current federal election campaign – but not that early.

Panelists argued over the significance of the week’s events with a bit more zeal than they had in the previous edition of the weekly breakfast series.

“I don’t think the U.S. bashing is good for Martin,” said panellist and Carleton University journalism professor Chris Waddell, referring to attempts by the Prime Minister in preceding days to criticize the United States – and specifically Washington’s envoy to Canada. At a luncheon address in Ottawa, David Wilkins had suggested Martin stop rebuking the U.S. over such matters as environmental policy and the ongoing softwood lumber dispute.

Waddell, a former parliamentary bureau chief with both the CBC and The Globe and Mail, said people in this country would “start to talk” about the potential folly in Martin’s election campaign bravado. He warned that Canadians, particularly businesspeople, might worry about U.S. retaliation to Martin’s sabre-rattling. Congressional elections on the horizon south of the border in 2006 might give American politicians the chance to take tough stands against Canada, Waddell suggested.

But panellist Andrew Cohen, Waddell’s colleague at Carleton and a former political writer with the Globe, the Financial Post and United Press International, disagreed. He called the U.S. issue “gold for the Liberals,” giving the party a reprieve from opposition criticism.

The panel – Waddell, Cohen, Nikita James Nanos, President of SES Research and Forum president Jodi White - appeared to agree that Conservative leader Stephen Harper’s confidence level has increased, and with it the perception that he is more comfortable in his skin. “Perhaps,” Cohen said, “you’re seeing the emergence of a pragmatic, agile Stephen Harper,” a man Cohen called “shrewder” than in the 2004 election and one “shedding his ideological, provincialist past.”

White drew attention to a letter Harper wrote to a Washington newspaper that had praised him as a friend of the Bush administration. In his letter Harper chose to downplay his neo-conservative background, a sign, White said, that Conservatives “must be seeing the numbers” suggesting how unpopular a link of their leader to U.S. President George W. Bush could be among most people in this country.

Nanos presented his analysis of the latest SES polling trends. The Bloc Québécois continued to hold a considerable lead in Québec and nothing Martin has done- even threatening the possibility of a referendum to scare federalists into the Liberal camp - has met with success. Meanwhile, the NDP had failed to gain momentum and party leader Jack Layton's popularity with voters continued to slide - from 16% to 11%. Voters aren't happy with any of the choices of leaders, Nanos said, and this is reflected in the number of voters than remain undecided.

In fact, the undecided vote is going to play a major role in determining the next government. Polling numbers last week put the proportion of undecided voters as high as 40%, Nanos said, adding many Canadians wouldn't make their final decision until the last weekend of the campaign.

While there were some missteps in the campaign last week, panelists believed it was still early enough to minimize their impact. Liberal Communication's Advisor, Scott Reid's "beer and popcorn" comment, criticizing the Conservative day care plan was played out in the media but didn't seem to have an impact on polling numbers.

Audience members betrayed a certain anticipation, a certain desire, to see the tipping point that would inexorably change the course of the campaign.

"January 23rd will be the tipping point," Waddell said, suggesting the weather on election day might decide the election and yield a voter turnout as low as 55 per cent, a number seven percentage points lower than the turnout in the 2004 election. In February 1980, the last time Canadians voted in midwinter, voter turnout was seven percentage points lower than the election of May 1979, Waddell said.

"There is no one single event as a turning point that is visible now," added Cohen.

Both Waddell and Cohen said the next election result may hinge on the desire of Canadian voters – among them Liberals disaffected by their party's perceived shortcomings after 12 years in power – to brave the January cold. An election on what could be one of the coldest days of the year might favour the Conservatives, they suggested, if enough Liberals expressed weariness with their own government and stayed home.

The next breakfast panel discussion will be held on Thursday, January 5, 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](#) or visit us online at www.ppforum.ca.

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

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