

Harper, Tories riding high

Moderate throne speech was well received, polls are improving and the Liberals are in disarray

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OTTAWA—It was a buoyant, confident Stephen Harper who basked in the chants of Conservative MPs shouting, "Harper, Harper."

Addressing caucus, he introduced the newest Tory MP to a rousing welcome. In a by-election stunner last month, Denis Lebel unseated the Bloc Québécois candidate in the separatist heartland of Roberval-Lac-Saint-Jean.

"Our victory in Roberval-Lac-Saint-Jean is not a fluke, not an accident. Our message is getting through loud and clear in all regions of Quebec, in all regions of Canada," Harper told caucus last Wednesday.

Harper and his Tories have good reason to be optimistic, perhaps even a little cocky. Just the day before, Governor General Michaëlle Jean delivered the Conservatives' throne speech, a middle-of-the-road blueprint that could win over moderate voters.

Their chief opponent, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion, is foundering under internal party strife and one poll says he's the least popular opposition leader in 20 years.

But perhaps most encouraging of all for Conservatives are new polls giving them the edge over the Liberals, breaking a public opinion logjam that lasted the summer.

Today, Harper is leading a cabinet that is more sure-footed and a government that's showing a more ambitious vision for the country as the realization sets in that they could be in power until October 2009, when fixed-date legislation sets the next vote.

"After 18 months, I think the PM and the cabinet have a much clearer sense of what the issues are and the direction that they want to take the

country," said Geoff Norquay, a Conservative strategist

"It's a growing confidence, some really hard work and a much more comprehensive picture of what the issues facing the country are and the choices for dealing with those issues."

But the Conservatives have been here before – ahead in the polls, yet unable to win over enough Canadians to assure themselves of a majority. Last fall, the party misread public mood on the environment and squandered support.

Now the question again is whether Harper and his Conservatives can capitalize on Liberal woes and break through in public opinion.

"I certainly think that at the moment the Harper Conservatives have reason for optimism and can feel emboldened by their position," said Paul Nesbitt-Larking, chair of political science at Huron University College at Western.

"On the negative side, they still have everything to prove. People have not given their support in the polls because I don't think they're convinced yet."

Truth is, Harper didn't expect his government to last this long without another election. That's why the Conservatives' first throne speech, delivered April 4, 2006, was short on vision, touting just a few easily attainable goals, such as making good on election promises to cut the goods and service tax and deliver child care payments to parents of young children.

"That was for a very, very simple reason," said Norquay, who worked in Harper's inner circle. "The government started its mandate with the working assumption that they probably wouldn't live much longer than the second budget."

Given that minority governments in Canada have rarely lasted longer than 18 months, Harper wanted to quickly establish a track record with voters. But the Conservatives were also new to government and needed to find their feet.

"For any incoming government, there is just so much you don't know about the day-to-day issues of running the government, the big challenges, how to effect change, what ideas are there in the public service on your priorities," Norquay said.

Now, with 18 months of experience under their belt – and the possibility of

two years yet to go – the Conservatives last week delivered a throne speech with a longer-term view of the priorities they see for the country.

It was speech with a conservative tone but nothing overtly partisan. It talked about reaffirming Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic, broad tax cuts and Canada's role abroad. And it devoted two pages to the environment, an issue that was relegated to just a single sentence in the first throne speech.

"In throne speech number two we see a much more comprehensive approach, clearer directions but all the same a moderate and middle-of-the-road set of priorities," Norquay said.

Still, Canadians aren't entirely won over. And there are misgivings, fuelled by opposition MPs, about the direction the Tories might take the country if they won a majority.

"I don't think the public have any confidence anybody should be given the keys to the car," said Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research Associates. "Canadians don't have that level of comfort right now. Maybe someone will build it in the future but I don't think Harper or Dion have produced that yet."

Yet every month Harper is in power, the more he has a chance to put voters at ease with his party's policies and ability to govern.

"I don't think the public are any longer thinking Stephen Harper is some kind of right-wing nutbar... . Most Canadians think the guy has done a pretty competent job of managing middle-of-the-road positions on most things," Graves said.

One of the hurdles Harper faces if he hopes to have a quick election to capitalize on polling trends and Liberal problems, Graves said, is that Canadians have grown comfortable with a minority government and are in no mood for another vote.

"The overall sentiment in the public is, 'Things are working okay, why rock the boat? We really don't even need an election right now,'" he said.