

Editorial ? Is PMO behind the Tories? plunge?

There was a time when we were told Canada was governed by Parliament when it was sitting and by the federal cabinet the rest of the year.

But during the current long election campaign, we've heard nothing about the federal cabinet having met. The reality seems to be that the country is being governed by the Prime Minister's Office, and likely has been since MPs left June 19 for what they undoubtedly expected would be a long summer holiday (we wonder how many of them had advance notice that Prime Minister Stephen Harper would launch an 11-week election campaign Civic Holiday weekend).

We'll likely never know who it was in the PMO or the Conservative party that pushed the idea of the long campaign, but we doubt that it was the party caucus, whose members didn't relish the thought of having to be out in the hustings all August.

However, the pundits have suggested the early election call was designed mainly to benefit the Tories in two ways, by allowing them to outspend their opponents and by limiting the ability of ?third parties? to participate in the campaign with their own advertising.

Whatever the case, the idea seems to have backfired.

Although the campaign started with the Conservatives out front and the main question being whether the slim lead over the NDP could be built upon to garner a fresh majority, the latest polling has the NDP and Liberals in a virtual tie for the lead and the Tories as far back in third place as the Liberals were in early August.

New polling released Monday night had the NDP on top with just under 33 per cent, the Liberals in second at 30.8 per cent and the Tories down to just over 26 per cent.

According to pollster Nik Nanos, the NDP have gained three percentage points and the Liberals two in the past month while the Tories dropped five points.

Interestingly, other polls have disclosed the existence of a huge pool of voters who haven't yet made up their minds and may wind up voting for either the Liberals or NDP, depending on which party has a lead in the final days of campaigning.

Another interesting factor is a changing public perception of the three party leaders' potential as occupants of the PMO. Initially, Harper was well out front, with NDP Leader Tom Mulcair in second place and Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau a dismal third ? due, no doubt in part to Conservative attack ads portraying him as ?just not ready.?

The latest polling shows the three leaders in a virtual dead heat, but with Harper slightly behind the two opposition leaders.

So how does one account for the apparent drop in support for the governing party?

One factor might well be the disclosures during the trial of Senator Mike Duffy of the role played by the PMO in trying to obfuscate, cover up and even lie about Nigel Wright's \$90,000-plus personal payment of Duffy's challenged expenses.

But if the most recent polling came in the wake of world reaction to the worsening Syrian refugee crisis and in particular the sight of the body of a dead child on the Turkish beach, and another reason was Harper's reaction to the news.

After Mulcair and Trudeau had both called for Canada to increase radically the current trickle of Syrian refugees to Canada, Harper simply defended his government's role and attacked the other parties' refusal to support Canadian military action against ISIS.

We are left wondering what role the PMO has played during the election campaign and whether it or Conservative party brass had given the PM advice on the subject.

Would the same advice have been given by others in the Harper cabinet or the Tory caucus, had either been in session? We suspect not.

At a time when Germany is prepared to admit 800,000 of the refugees and even Britain and France are promising to bring in more, the current Canadian commitment to allow just 10,000 in the next four years is ridiculously inadequate.

And we're left wondering whether either the Liberals or NDP will commit to curbing the enormous power of the PMO.