COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION TURNS ON TORIES

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By Chantal Hébert, The Toronto Star, 15 January 2010

Over their four years in power, Stephen Harper's Conservatives have won more public opinion battles by dismissing their critics as elite members of a disconnected chattering class than they have lost.

Where past governments have routinely sought to enhance the credibility of their policies by seeking backing for them from academic, editorial or professional circles, Stephen Harper and his government have most often successfully gone the other way.

Rather than pit the sometimes thin substance of their arguments against those of more authoritative critics, they have made a virtue of talking over expert heads, and, if need be, of shooting any contradictory messenger.
Harper spelled out his distinctive approach to future policy debates early on, in a state-of-the-government speech delivered six months after his government's initial swearing-in.
"Rather than funding academics, researchers and special interest groups, we decided to direct our child-care money to the real child-care experts. And their names are Mom and Dad," the Prime Minister reported to a partisan crowd in August 2006.

Since then, anti-intellectualism has evolved into a mantra of the current government, a trend that was likely exacerbated by the selection by the Liberal party of successive leaders with strong roots in academia.

But while the track record of the Conservative government includes more hits than misses on the rhetoric front, some of those misses have tended to be spectacular. On that score, the miscalculation over the arts cuts that sent the party fortunes into a tailspin in Quebec in the last general election stands out.

In that campaign, the Prime Minister compounded his Quebec predicament by portraying the cultural community as a spoiled elite living off the labour of ordinary Canadian.

In Quebec, Harper's attempts to drive a wedge between the voters and the artists ended up reflecting more poorly on his party than on the vocal constituency he was trying to marginalize.

The same dynamics are being replicated in the debate over prorogation.

The latest twist in the Conservative narrative on the decision to keep Parliament closed for most of the winter is that it is a tempest in an elite teapot. In the words of Industry Minister Tony Clement, the whole affair is a "blip on the Richter scale of upset."

But this week, three separate polls put significantly negative numbers for the government on that blip. On the heels of the prorogation announcement, the decisive Conservative lead in voting intentions has evaporated.

So far, the controversy has had the most impact on Conservative fortunes in Ontario, ground zero of the media backlash over the move.

Short of reversing course, the Conservatives' best hope now lies in a swift change in channels rather than in more increasingly clumsy attempts to justify what a majority of Canadians perceive as unjustifiable.

Looking at the polls, it would be tempting to conclude that the so-called chattering class has scored a rare point against Conservative spin doctors. But the more likely explanation is that, as in the case of the arts cuts in Quebec, the Conservatives are losing the prorogation debate on their preferred field of populism.

The anecdotal evidence suggests that for better or for worse most Canadians believe a government day's work involves interacting with the minority Parliament. Against that backdrop, the sight of Conservative MPs indulging in a multitude of photo opportunities at next month's Winter Olympics is more likely to drive home the opposition message than any amount of Liberal attack ads.