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The automaton goes on and on

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In two years in office Stephen Harper has earned respect but not love. Yet Canadians show no sign of tiring of bloodless politics

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MINORITY governments seldom last long in Canada. So when Stephen Harper led his Conservative party to office, but without a parliamentary majority, in a federal election in January 2006, pundits confidently predicted he would soon seek a bigger mandate from the voters. Five fairly straightforward campaign promises were ticked off quickly. But the expected election call never came. Instead Mr Harper pushed through a law fixing parliamentary terms. Unless the opposition gangs up to bring him down, or unless he engineers that outcome himself, his government will soldier on until October 2009—a span exceeded only once before by a minority administration.

That is partly testament to the disarray of a divided opposition. The Liberals, its main element, were leaderless for much of 2006 before picking Stéphane Dion, a mild-mannered policy wonk, who has made a slow start. But Mr Harper has been unable to do much more than survive. Respected for his competence, he has all the charisma of an automaton. "I thought that people needed time to get used to Mr Harper," says Roger Gibbins of the Canada West Foundation, an Alberta-based think-tank. "But it's turned out that to know Harper is not to love him." That is especially true for women. Opinion polls show little change in allegiance since the last election—except for a brief moment of Conservative advance last autumn (see chart).

Mr Harper may come to regret not forcing an election then. For the going is getting tougher. His party has not been helped by the raking up of a scandal involving payments in brown envelopes by an

arms lobbyist to Brian Mulroney, a former Conservative prime minister, in the 1990s. These claims were revived because the lobbyist, Karlheinz Schreiber, is fighting extradition to Germany, where he faces bribery and fraud charges. Although a tainted witness, he flung enough mud at Mr Mulroney during hearings by a parliamentary committee before Christmas that some of it stuck. Mr Harper felt obliged to promise a public inquiry once the committee has finished its hearings.

Then there are the problems of Canada's ageing nuclear industry. These were highlighted in November when Linda Keen, the head of the nuclear-safety regulator, refused to allow the Chalk River reactor, one of the world's main suppliers of medical isotopes, to restart after routine maintenance because of the failure to install a back-up power system. With customers fearing a shortage of isotopes, parliament passed emergency legislation ordering the reactor to restart without the back-up system. The government then ousted Ms Keen from her post, damaging public confidence in the industry.

Trickier still is Afghanistan, where 77 Canadian troops and a diplomat have died since 2002. Canada's military mission there—it has some 2,500 troops in Kandahar in the south, where insurgents are active—is unpopular, but has been strongly supported by Mr Harper. To defuse criticism, he appointed a non-partisan committee under John Manley, a Liberal former foreign minister, to consider the mission's future. On January 22nd the committee recommended that it continue—but only if reinforced by 1,000 extra troops from another NATO country as well as by more aircraft. Unless Mr Harper secures such support at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, he could face defeat on the issue in the House of Commons.

By then the economy may have become his biggest problem. Years of strong growth, fuelled by high prices for commodity exports, risk being curtailed by the looming recession in the United States, which takes four-fifths of Canada's exports. The more pessimistic among economists reckon that Canada's fiscal and current-account surpluses could disappear. The Bank of Canada trimmed its benchmark lending rate by 25 basis points to 4% on January 22nd and hinted at further cuts.

Nobody is panicking yet. But slower growth will redouble calls from the premiers of Ontario and Quebec for federal help for manufacturing, which has suffered from the strength of the Canadian dollar. Mr Harper this month announced C\$1 billion (\$990m) in aid, mainly for one-industry towns where plants close. More schemes like that might win him the extra seats in central Canada that he needs for a parliamentary majority. But he will have less money to play with in the budget, due in late February or early March, and he has already pledged tax cuts.

This year is shaping up to be Mr Harper's most difficult so far. But there is not yet any sign that the opposition will feel sufficiently emboldened to bring him down and trigger an election. Its leaders will be studying the opinion polls as closely as the prime minister. These show that "Canadians are pretty satisfied with the way the world is going," says Darrell Bricker of Ipsos-Reid, a polling company. Too satisfied, it seems, to want to kick the government out.

