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NEWS

Conservatives shouldn't focus too much on \$10.5-million Khadr settlement or risk looking 'intolerant,' warn Tory insiders

Tories need to pay attention to pocketbook issues that average Canadians face on a daily basis, says pollster Nik Nanos.



Conservative insiders Tim Powers, left, and Andrew MacDougall want their party to be cautious how they handle the Omar Khadr issue. Conservative MP Peter Kent says the party is pushing the issue because Canadians want a detailed explanation from Justin Trudeau why the government settled the lawsuit filed by Mr. Khadr. *The Hill Times* photographs by Jake Wright

By ABBAS RANA (<http://www.hilltimes.com/author-stories/?author=Abbas Rana>)

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The Conservatives should focus on pocketbook issues that affect the daily lives of average Canadians if they want to win the next election, and not on the controversial \$10.5-million compensation to Omar Khadr because it makes them look "intolerant" and "out of touch," say some Tory political insiders.

“They have to watch putting themselves in a trap where they’re portrayed as intolerant and out of touch or getting a little bit too aggressive and saying something that is going to hurt the Conservative brand,” said Conservative political insider Tim Powers, vice chairman of Summa Strategies in an interview with *The Hill Times*.

Mr. Powers, a veteran Conservative who has been involved in federal politics since he was a Hill staffer in the Brian Mulroney cabinet, also disagreed with the party’s decision to let Conservative MPs Peter Kent (Thornhill, Ont.) and Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, Alta.) criticize the Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) government in the U.S. media about the settlement payment.

Mr. Kent, in an opinion piece headlined, “A Terrorist’s Big Payday, Courtesy of Trudeau” in *The Wall Street Journal*, and Ms. Rempel, in an interview with Fox News, both recently blasted the Liberal government for making the payment to Mr. Khadr.

Mr. Powers said the approach may help the Conservatives to keep the story alive, but could negatively affect the ongoing NAFTA negotiations between the two countries and may upset some Canadians who don’t agree with the strategy.

“They [Conservatives] don’t get votes south of the border, but they may irritate people up here about it, and it may have an impact on some of the trade files,” said Mr. Powers. “They may want to be careful with all of that.”

Andrew MacDougall, former director of communications to former prime minister Stephen Harper, said the Conservatives need to be careful about how they’re perceived by Canadians. He criticized his party the way they handled the Khadr file and argued that this could reinforce the perception of Canadians about the Conservatives as “the nasty party.”

“Whether Conservatives like it or not, they are perceived as the nasty party,” Mr. MacDougall wrote in an article in *Macleans* magazine last week. “They must always be mindful that the people they need to persuade to once again form government aren’t likely to be persuaded by anger or incivility, especially against a smiling, earnest opponent like Trudeau. Harpooning the prime minister on Khadr isn’t going to change the outcome.”

On July 7, the Canadian government paid \$10.5-million and offered a public apology to Toronto-born Omar Khadr, a former inmate at the U.S. detention centre in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The federal government made the settlement in response to a \$20-million civil lawsuit that Mr. Khadr’s lawyers filed for their client’s wrongful imprisonment and violation of his Charter rights.

In 2002, the 15-year-old Khadr was captured in Afghanistan in a firefight with U.S. troops in which he was wounded. Later, he was transferred to Guantanamo Bay after he was accused of allegedly throwing a grenade that killed a U.S. Army medic. In 2010, Mr. Khadr was charged with war crimes and sentenced to eight years excluding the time he had already spent at the Guantanamo Bay. He accepted a plea deal and was transferred to Canada in 2012. Later, Mr. Khadr recanted his position and said he pleaded guilty because he accepted the charge under duress.

Mr. Trudeau explained to reporters three weeks ago that the government chose to settle the case because fighting it in the court could have cost taxpayers \$30-\$40 million. Also, he said the government would “inevitably have lost” the case.

“I can understand Canadians’ concerns about the settlement,” Mr. Trudeau told reporters in a press conference on July 13. “In fact, I share those concerns about the money; that’s why we settled. If we had continued to fight this, not only would we have inevitably lost, but estimates range from \$30-million to \$40-million that it would have ended up costing the government.”

At the G20 meeting in Hamburg, Germany, on July 8, Mr. Trudeau also defended his government’s decision to settle the lawsuit saying “the Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects all Canadians even when it’s uncomfortable.”

“The Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects all Canadians, every one of us, even when it is uncomfortable. This is not about the details or merits of the Khadr case. When the government violates any Canadians’ Charter rights we all end up paying for it,” Mr. Trudeau told reporters.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said the government chose to settle lawsuit as court proceedings could have cost the taxpayers \$30-\$40-million and the government would have lost the case. The Hill Times photograph by Sam Garcia.

In an interview last week with *The Hill Times*, Mr. Kent said his party is pushing the issue because, based on “anecdotal” evidence, Canadians want their government to provide a detailed explanation about why they made the settlement without fighting it in the court. He said he wrote the article for *The Wall Street Journal* to educate Americans who were interested in the subject. He said the Leader of the Official Opposition’s Office requested the op-ed, Mr. Kent offered to write it, and the

OLO sent it to *The Wall Street Journal*.

“My personal experience, anecdotally in the last couple of weeks, is that Canadians across political stripes are very unhappy with the Khadr decision, and they want to know more about it and we’re going to continue to push the government to explain and justify this unacceptable behaviour,” said Mr. Kent who is his party’s foreign affairs critic.

As for criticism that the Conservatives are going too far and could negatively affect the upcoming NAFTA talks, Mr. Kent called it “ridiculous,” and said the two issues are entirely different and should not be confused.

“That’s ridiculous, it’s apples and oranges, two separate issues,” he said. “I wrote the piece in response to friends and political colleagues in the States who were trying to understand what was going on with the attempted secret payout.”

However, Mr. Kent said the trade talks could be affected by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s (Papineau, Que.) appearance on the cover page of the U.S. based *Rolling Stone* magazine last week which carried the provocative headline “Justin Trudeau: Why Can’t He Be Our President?”

Moreover, Mr. Kent said while he and the Conservatives will focus on the economy and will continue to hammer away at the Khadr settlement, only “time will tell” whether Canadians will deem them as “intolerant” because they pushed the Khadr issue.

“Well, time will tell and we’re focusing on the jobs and the economy and issues that are important to Canadians,” Mr. Kent said. “But, we will continue to push for answers in this case, because it’s quite clear that Canadians want to know why the government did what it did.”

Mr. Harper also publicly agreed with the Conservatives MPs’ criticism of the Canadian government in the U.S. media.

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Pollster Nik Nanos of Nanos Research said, based on his company’s research, going after the Liberals on the Khadr issue has not given any boost to the Conservatives and said they win when they highlight issues that affect the lives of average Canadians like the economy, personal finances, and health-care issues.

“The lesson here is people might not like it [the Khadr compensation], they might not be happy but how important is this compared to, ‘Do I have a job? Can my mother get a hip replaced?’” Mr. Nanos said. “It’s probably not as important, that’s why we haven’t seen the Conservatives actually gain traction as a result of this.”

Mr. Nanos said the Conservative strategy to speak out against their own government in the U.S. may prove counter productive to the Canadians. He said that this issue is “like a family squabble” and Canadians “might feel uncomfortable” watching their politicians airing their differences in the U.S. media for short term political gain.

“It’s like a family squabble,” said Mr. Nanos. “Although Canadians might not like Omar Khadr, they might feel a little uncomfortable when politicians try to make political gain and [air their] differences in the United States.”

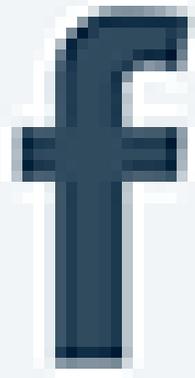
According to the Nanos Party Power Index, the Liberals currently have the support of 39 per cent of Canadians followed by the Conservatives with 30 per cent support, the NDP 18.4 per cent and the Green Party with 6.2 per cent support. The phone survey, conducted July 14-21, of 1,000 Canadians has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. It was released July 25.

Pollster Nik Nanos of Nanos Research says Conservatives should focus on pocket book issues that affect the lives of average Canadians on a daily basis. The Hill Times photograph by Jake Wright.

Other public opinion polls reported in the media, in the last two weeks, indicated that Canadians were unhappy with the settlement payment, but it did not negatively affect their overall opinion about the Trudeau government’s performance or their likability for the prime minister.

The Hill Times

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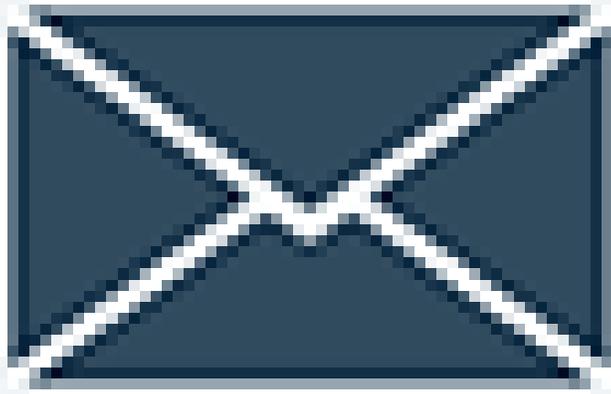
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