

Canada leader well loved

New prime minister's
popularity is peaking
with election looming

By Peter Benesh

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TORONTO — On her way to becoming a political phenomenon, Canada's interim prime minister, Kim Campbell has become the most popular national political leader in 30 years.

She's been in office only since June 25, but a Gallup poll, taken between July 25 and Aug. 8, and before several key events sure to boost her rating further, shows that 51 per cent of Canadian voters approve of her performance. Only 22 per cent disapprove.

The poll is good news to Canada's first female prime minister, because Campbell, 46, must call a national election to be held before mid-November to seek a new mandate for her Conservative Party. Unlike the U.S. presidential and congressional system, Canada's parliamentary government does not establish fixed election dates. The prime minister may choose the date, within the limits of the government's five-year term.

In the Gallup poll, Campbell edged out even former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, who gave Canada "Trudeaumania" when he swept to a big political victory in 1968, but whose approval rating never topped 50 per cent.

Frustrated by her growing popularity, and by the fear that Campbell's strength may lift her Conservative Party from the quicksand in which former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had left it mired, opposition critics have been calling her names and challenging her to come out and fight.

Referring to her as "Mulroney in a skirt," and as a Canadian (Margaret) Thatcher, Campbell's opponents in the Liberal, New Democratic, Reform and Bloc Quebecois parties have signaled they will not campaign by "Marquess of Queensbury" rules. For example, the leader of the pro-separatist Bloc Quebecois, Lucien Bouchard, threatened Sunday that "the picnic is over."

Jean Chretien, leader of the official opposition Liberal Party has approval from only 37 per cent of voters. New Democratic Leader Audrey McLaughlin, whose party promotes Canadian nationalism, saw her pre-election campaign implode when the press discovered that her first campaign video had been produced in Washington, D.C.

Reform Party leader Preston Manning, a populist from Western Canada (Alberta), has had the ground cut out from under him, losing the home-team advantage to Campbell, who is also a westerner (British Columbia).

Campbell has had to cope with the shadow of Mulroney, the most unpopular leader in the history of Canadian polling. Since the poll was taken, Campbell has taken several other steps certain to boost her popularity. The prime minister:

- "Hung tough" on Canada's position that the North American Free Trade Agreement should exempt Canada from punitive sanctions;
- Ordered the Canadian military to bring 20 Bosnian war victims to Canada for treatment;
- Announced plans to reduce the pension entitlements of Members of Parliament, who can receive lifetime pensions if they quit politics or are defeated after just six years in the House of Commons.

With time running out, Oct. 25 looks to be a likely election day. Campbell would have to announce the date eight weeks earlier to allow the required time for the campaign.

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