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The Federal Conservative Budget.....an analysis by Hugh McCullum

The following is a collection of opinions from opposition MPs. I saw Blake and Beanington, the pundits on the Hill, Simpson, Don Newman, Dan Gaspé, Tony Clarke and some others.

Also watched a terse and defensive interview with Prentice on CPAC. He says Aboriginal people are getting \$10 billion total, Kelowna will not be revived under a Conservative government -- job training, east coast fishery and clean water on reserves is all the new money (\$125 million new money, that's all. He said nothing about land claims more than the para which the media doesn't seem to pick up much on which I quoted yesterday. and the MGP which, of course is his baby and NWT's, but it's unpopular with the greens.

Some analysts say there is a three-way internal power struggle in the Conservative cabinet for power and succession. If Harper doesn't get a majority in this next election, the long knives will be out and the holders of the longest knives are Flaherty, Baird and Prentice (who to the naysayers think may be too close to Harper and is a neo-con).

Generally, the budget is not being well accepted except in Quebec. Alberta is upset, too ideologically liberal (ie Paul Martin could brought in this big spending budget). The greens and Greens think it worse environmentally than anything they could have imagined, no plan just some tinkering with fines against big SUVs and subsidies for small cars and other bits and piece for several years before the tar sands regulations kick in.. Most people think Flaherty blew his environmental credentials (and Harper's) in a country where many people are very green.

Aboriginal reaction continues to be highly negative and mainstream media are picking it up as on The National last night and Newsworld all day. The greatest fear for the Harperites is that their preoccupation with Quebec and its seemingly endless demands may, and already is, sparking a backlash, especially in B.C. Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Atlantic Canada.

The Stephen Harper party is not for all Canadians, just about 40 percent of the electorate. It isn't interested in people who listen to CBC, read the Globe and Mail, urban elites, media pundits and whining interest groups (this includes the AFN and other Aboriginal groups) and followers of David Suzuki, people interested in foreign affairs and civil servants.

He is interested in farmers, retirees, middle-income families who live in the suburban or exurban districts "who work hard, don't dine out much, go regularly to Tim Hortons, take care of their kids, watch American television and feel pinched daily by the cost of living. Analysts say they are the kind of people who kept Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in power but not neo-con Bushites.

Some thoughtful people say Harper wants to help these people, the average middle class family, law-abiding, struggling to pay bills and patriotic of Canada in situations like Afghanistan. He knows they are the big section of voters but not just how big.. he is not interested in the poor, Aboriginal people, the homeless, the intelligentsia etc.

He wants a loose federation. But the good news for us is that this is not the first time Conservatives had gone this route and it always ended in disaster, producing a backlash -- and this time it will be led by the environmentalists. Look at Mulroney, Diefenbaker, Kim Campbell.

Alberta is very angry because of the income trusts and the no capital gains promises that were broken.

But what Alberta fears most are the coming (when?) greenhouse gas emissions regulations (and hopefully, Herd, we van lobby water.

A majority Conservative government is by no means assured, nor is a spring election as I write this the first day of Spring. The Quebec election is too close to call on Monday. But possibly a minority there. The performance of Dion is generally not good (especially language) for Liberals so it is good for Conservatives.

Maybe there is a niche for the Dehcho being strong, green, innovative on land use planning and strong. Some green allies, come remnants of the human and civil rights groups to make a well-planned strategic noise to attract all those who Harper doesn't care about. Best, Hugh

As with Aboriginal people and daycare, none of these angry provinces (and Danny Williams is fuming that Harper is totally untrustworthy) it seems Harper know they haven't the votes to be a threat to a majority whereas Quebec suburban Toronto (the Tories have lost 9 of the 10 biggest urban areas by this budget)