

Time to start tuning them out?

AS ALL CANADIANS should know, the next federal election is still nearly four months off, the official polling date being established as Monday, October 19. That is, unless the government for some reason chose to move it up a bit.

But here we are in late June and the election ads are already on the airwaves, among them Conservative attack ads portraying Liberal leader Justin Trudeau as just not ready to take over the Prime Minister's Office.

Just why all the attack is directed at the Liberals might strike some as curious. However, the ad campaign was plotted out a long time ago, when polls suggested the Liberals were the main threat to the decade-old Conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Recent polling suggests otherwise, indicating that the New Democrats have moved out front, perhaps because of the party's surprise triumph in Alberta.

However, the polls may also reflect some good image-building by the NDP with TV commercials clearly designed to promote both leader Tom Mulcair and the party's platform as moderate and Mr. Mulcair himself as capable of smiling.

The Conservatives' plans are already pretty clear, relying on a combination of taxpayer-paid advertising that promotes the party's legislative accomplishments (mainly tax cuts for two-income families) and thus-far-successful attack ads.

According to an editorial in Tuesday's Globe and Mail, the Tories also plan to rely on some third-party advertising from HarperPAC, a group of high-level Conservative operatives whose mission is to "defend the interests of everyday Canadians against the tide of cash from professional leftist agitators and big union bosses that has been earmarked to take down the Conservative government."

They will presumably be in addition to other pro-Tory organizations like Working Canadians and Conservative Voice, which Engage Canada, a centre-left group, says "have spent millions protecting wealthy conservative interests and monopolizing political discussion in Canada."

It remains to be seen whether the Tory and pro-Tory attack ads will now start targeting the NDP.

However, it now seems certain that our eyes and ears will be challenged by what the Globe described as "tit-for-tat partisan groups raising millions of dollars unhindered by election laws and spending it, again without restriction, on negative advertising. It is an exercise fuelled by a common disregard for solid facts, with each side spouting convenient half-truths and twisting opponents' words in an effort to confirm your biases and/or scare you out of exploring your options."

The current election laws merely prevent such groups from spending more than \$205,800 once an election is called, which won't be until September when the official writ is issued.

"Now that Canada has fixed federal election dates, these groups will have more opportunities to affect voters' thinking in the long lead-up to every general vote," the editorial says, adding:

"It's going to be confusing for Canadians. It won't be clear to them what the affiliations of the various groups are. The greatest risk is that these negative and cynically presented campaigns will further alienate the electorate. Wise voters will drown out the noise and wait for the election campaign, and prefer not to be influenced by disingenuous groups who say they are looking out for you but are really working in the interest of political parties."

One real problem facing the Liberals and NDP is that they will essentially be courting the same voters, thanks to both having emerged as occupying the centre-left portion of Canada's political spectrum.

And that may well lead to both opposition parties spending most of their time and money promoting their leaders, with Messrs Mulcair and Trudeau both trying their best to look ?prime ministerial.?

Thus far, Mr. Trudeau has perhaps deliberately avoided making major pronouncements, merely suggesting that a Liberal government would improve Canada's relations with the United States and Mexico while itself being more open and accountable to the electorate.