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Martin pushes his way back

Liberals pull ahead of Tories

Reverse slide in Ontario support

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OTTAWA—The political alliance between federal Liberals and New Democrats is helping push Prime Minister Paul Martin's government onto the comeback trail, according to a new *Toronto Star* poll.

The poll, by EKOS Research Associates, was the first to be conducted after Martin made his deal with NDP Leader Jack Layton to help save the government. It shows the Liberals rebounding and back ahead of the Conservatives nationally after a dramatic plunge earlier this month.

Martin's Liberals now stand at 32.5 per cent among decided voters, compared to 30.5 per cent for the Tories and 19 per cent for the NDP. Just three weeks ago, the Liberals bottomed out at 25 per cent while Conservatives were rising with 36 per cent support nationally.

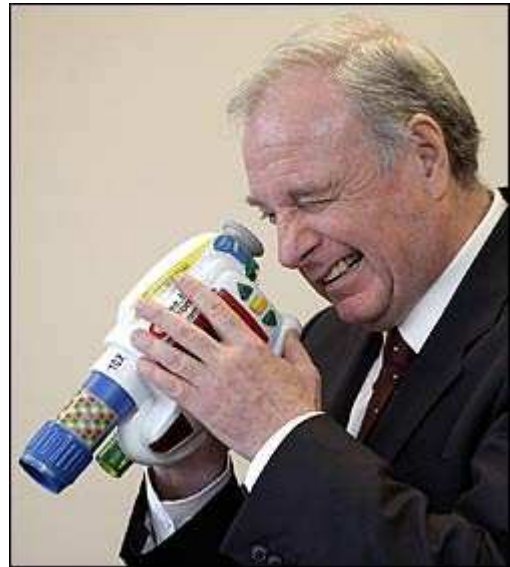
In Ontario, the Liberals have climbed back to 39 per cent while the Tories are at 33; a near complete reversal of results a couple of weeks ago and more in keeping with the province's Liberal-friendly tradition. With 106 seats, Ontario will be the main battleground in the election.

In fact, overall, it seems that most of the dramatic trends witnessed at the beginning of this month have now reversed, the *Star-La Presse* poll shows, and Martin's new pact with Layton could be proving to be a helpful factor in the Liberal bounceback. On Tuesday night, Martin and Layton announced an agreement that forces the Liberals to rewrite the budget in return for NDP support in securing its passage.

When EKOS asked respondents which federal political alliance made them least comfortable, a full 59 per cent declared unease with a Conservative-Bloc Québécois alliance, compared to 33 per cent who said a Liberal-NDP pact.

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper has declared that he wants to put the government "out of its misery" by voting with the Bloc to defeat the Liberals, even with the NDP siding with Martin.

Martin and Layton have been saying for several days that Harper is now in bed with the separatists in



MARIANNE HELM/CANADIAN PRESS

Prime Minister Paul Martin's pact with NDP Leader Jack Layton could prove to be farsighted. Martin, seen playing with a toy video recorder yesterday on a visit to a Winnipeg children's centre, may be experiencing a bounce in popularity because of the deal.

STAR COLUMNISTS

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an attempt to force an early election and prevent major progressive programs such as daycare and public housing from going ahead.

Today's poll shows that Martin and Layton's efforts may be having some effect. EKOS found that public anger is abating over the dramatic allegations of kickbacks and tax-dollar abuse revealed earlier this month at Justice John Gomery's inquiry into the sponsorship scandal.

Harper's similar fanning-out efforts this week, on the other hand, seem not to be helping. Indeed, EKOS found that 50 per cent of Canadians "just can't see" the Conservative leader being elected as prime minister. Nor are Harper's chances improved when people see him as an ally of the Bloc.

"While Stephen Harper may see an NDP-(Liberal) alliance as unholy, his reliance on the BQ to dislodge the Liberals may well constitute the Conservatives' most glaring exposed flank," EKOS president Frank Graves says.

"Paul Martin and Jack Layton are regarded as a far less frightening political couple; rather, it is Stephen Harper and Gilles Duceppe who are seen as disturbing and beyond odd bedfellows."

But the Liberals aren't out of the woods. Buried among generally positive news for the Liberals are these results:

★ A majority of Canadians, 60 per cent, feel it's time for a new government in Ottawa. Still, that's roughly the same number who thought so a year ago, too.

★ Anger over the sponsorship issue is still running higher than anger over any early election call. While 52 per cent of Canadians said they would be inclined to punish a party at the ballot box over the sponsorship issue, only 35 per cent said they would hold an early election against any party when making their voting choice.

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Frank Graves, EKOS president

★ Martin is seen more as part of the problem than as part of the solution. While 32 per cent said he had no part in the sponsorship scandal and deserves credit for calling the inquiry, almost twice that number — 62 per cent — agreed he should be accountable because he was a key player in the government that ushered in the program.

★ In Quebec, things are not so rosy for Martin. The Bloc Québécois stands at 49 per cent, the Liberals, 21, NDP, 14, and Conservatives, 11.

But on a countrywide basis, Martin seems to be holding his own, relative to Harper. Overall, 36 per cent of respondents identified Martin as the best leader for the country as a whole, compared to 28 per cent who saw Harper through that lens.

When respondents were asked which leader was best for the interests of particular provinces, Martin was seen as best for Ontario, B.C. and the Atlantic, while Harper scored highest in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The poll was conducted this week, from Tuesday to Thursday, among 1,212 Canadians of voting age (18) or older. The results are deemed valid to within 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases when results are subdivided by region.

Harper and Martin were taking a low-keyed, even skeptical view of polls yesterday.

Scott Reid, a spokesman for Martin, said: "The Prime Minister has something more lasting than any poll. He has a plan — a plan to ensure Canadians get a full reckoning for what occurred with the sponsorship program and a plan to deliver on the priorities that Canadians care about such as better child care, stronger health care and a greener, cleaner environment.

"By way of comparison, Mr. Harper is all anger and ambition. His only message to Canadians right now is that he's bound and determined to kill this budget and force an early election — even going so far as to work with the separatist Bloc Québécois."

In Calgary, asked why his party seemed to be going down in support, Harper said: "We've had how many polls in the last two weeks? We've had at least a dozen or more public polls. They're all different. They all contradict each other and I don't take any significance from any of them. It's going to be the voters who make the decision."

Still, this new EKOS poll shows that a week can indeed be a lifetime in politics and especially a week in which political leaders have been engaged in such frenetic activity. Martin, Harper and Layton inundated Ontario with visits this week, while the Liberal-NDP deal was being negotiated and Conservatives were weighing the public appetite for an election.

The poll shows more Canadians would like to see a majority government than a minority government, a reversal of attitudes seen in February 2004. But is also finds a public resigned to a minority, with 69 per cent predicting that as the likely outcome of the next election.

The Liberals have 132 seats in the House of Commons, the Conservatives 99, the Bloc 54, NDP 19. There are three independents and one vacancy.

New Democrats have reason to cheer today's poll results, with Graves saying: "Not since the salad days of the 1980s have the NDP been poised to exert such influence on the Canadian political scene."

The NDP tops all other parties as the second choice, with 24 per cent of respondents saying they would move their vote to Layton's party.

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