

Liberal majority ahead?

Poll puts party well ahead of Tories Gomery backlash apparently fading

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OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The Liberals are heading into the election campaign with a majority victory in sight and a lead of almost 10 percentage points over the second-place Conservatives, a new *Toronto Star* poll says.

Recovering from the negative impact of Justice John Gomery's sponsorship report, the Liberals stand at 38.7 per cent of voter support, while the Conservatives have 29.4 per cent and New Democrats have 16.9 per cent, according to EKOS Research Associates Inc.

The Bloc Québécois, which fields candidates only in Quebec, has 10.6 per cent while the Green Party stands at 3.9 per cent support among decided voters.

The opposition parties are poised to defeat the Liberal minority on Monday.

Prime Minister Paul Martin will visit Governor General Michaëlle Jean on Tuesday to ask for dissolution of Parliament.

The election is expected to be set for Jan. 16 or Jan. 23.

The public backlash from the Gomery Inquiry findings on Liberal Party involvement in the sponsorship scandal — released on Nov. 1 — appears to be gradually fading, EKOS president Frank Graves says.

"The Liberals are back where they were prior to Justice Gomery's report at the beginning of the month," he said. "Although the election campaign could substantially alter the balance between the parties, from their position now, the Liberals can begin to dream about recovering the majority government they lost in the 2004 election."

The Liberals' popularity has risen 5.7 percentage points from the 33 per cent recorded in early November, while the Tories have increased 1.5 percentage points from 27.9 per cent a few weeks ago. The NDP, which stood at 20.9 per cent in early November, has dropped four percentage points.

In the 2000 election, the Liberals captured a majority of Commons seats with 40.8 per cent of ballots cast.

Graves said the Conservatives appear to be stalled as the election campaign nears. "Most worrisome for them is that the Liberals are opening up a larger lead in two key battlegrounds: Ontario and British Columbia."

In Ontario, Liberal support stands at 46 per cent, while the Conservatives have 33 per cent and NDP 16 per cent.

B.C. is shaping up as the hottest region in the campaign between now and voting day. The EKOS poll gives the Liberals 43 per cent in B.C., New Democrats 33 per cent and the Tories 21 per cent.

Polling coincided with Liberal government announcements of billions of dollars in new spending for the forestry sector, struggling automakers, aboriginals, immigrants, farmers and others. And the survey came only a week after Finance Minister Ralph Goodale promised \$30 billion in tax cuts.

More than half of respondents (56 per cent) said the country "is moving in the right direction," while 36 per cent said it wasn't, and 8 per cent had no opinion.

Graves said this result may be behind the Liberals' improved popularity

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"The key thing for this campaign is the direction of the country," he said. "Right now this is actually lifting the Liberal vote. Although many Canadians are disillusioned with the Liberals after a dozen years in office, their relative satisfaction with the direction of the country means that many may be reluctant to rock the boat, so to speak, by ejecting them from office."

The Liberals currently hold 133 seats in the 308-seat House of Commons. The Tories have 98 seats, the Bloc 53 and the NDP 18 seats. There are four independents and two vacant seats.

The poll results are based on telephone interviews with 802 adults between Nov. 22 and Nov. 24. The margin of error is plus-or-minus 3.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error increases for regional breakdowns of the results.

In what may be a measure of Canadians' dissatisfaction with political leaders on the eve of an election, 43 per cent told pollsters they "don't know" who would make the best prime minister.

But, among those who did express a preference, Martin is on top, with 21 per cent support, compared to 12 per cent for Conservative Leader Stephen Harper and 8 per cent for the NDP's Jack Layton.

Graves said Canadians are definitely more inclined to support Martin as prime minister, particularly young people and women. But he points out that these groups are less likely to go to the polls, on average, than other voters. And he said Harper is being perceived somewhat better as a potential prime minister. Layton also does well on the leadership question despite the fact the NDP is unlikely to form a government.

On another issue, the poll found a sharp disconnect between Quebecers and the rest of the country over the likelihood of Quebec sovereignty.

More than 50 per cent of Quebecers said the province is "likely" or "somewhat likely" to separate from Canada within five years. Outside Quebec, only 28 per cent said this was "likely" or "somewhat likely."

Graves said Quebecers' expectations that the province would achieve sovereignty are higher now than before the 1995 referendum, which the federalists won by only a razor-thin margin.

Meanwhile, pre-election posturing intensified yesterday, Sean Gordon and Bruce Campion-Smith report, with Martin demanding an apology and retraction from Harper over his charge on Thursday that the \$250 million sponsorship program was "a front for massive kickbacks, involving organized crime, used by the Liberal party to fill its own election coffers."

But an unrepentant Harper demanded an apology from the Liberals for the sponsorship imbroglio.

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