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Dalton breaking promises, poll finds

By James Wallace

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Local News - Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty is earning a reputation as a 'promise-breaker,' a poll by SES Research published yesterday concludes.

One out of every four Ontarians cited "broken promises" as the main concern they have about the new premier.

Only nine per cent view McGuinty as "honest" and just a quarter of those surveyed believe he's done a good job since winning the Oct. 2 provincial election.

The Liberals, on the other hand, has remained popular among voters and has picked up backers since the election.

The SES poll pegs Liberal support among voters at 49 per cent – up two points since the election– and the NDP up four points to 19 per cent. Meanwhile, Tory support has plummeted five points to 29 per cent.

"McGuinty has become the lightning rod for voter frustration over delayed election promises," said SES president Nikita Nanos.

"They haven't done a very good job of explaining why they're breaking promises."

McGuinty has struggled during the first four months of his new administration to meet public demands for quick action on the promises he made during the campaign.

The Liberals campaigned on a "Choose Change" platform that included promises both for fiscal responsibility and new spending, particularly in health care and education.

After taking office, McGuinty hired former provincial auditor Erik Peters to review the province's books and Peters found a \$5.6 billion deficit, much higher, the Liberals argued, than the \$2 billion to \$3 billion they expected.

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McGuinty rejected major, immediate spending cuts to make up the shortfall and instead ordered his new ministers to look for ways to save money.

While that went on, the new government either abandoned, backed away from, or delayed, a number of election promises.

Broken promises include a retreat from a firm commitment to balance Ontario's budget (the government now says it may have to run a deficit for a year or two); reversing a promise to maintain a cap on hydro rates; fudging promises to stop a major housing development on the Oak Ridges Moraine; and to stop plans for privately-built hospitals.

Other stumbling blocks included admissions the government must delay plans for smaller class sizes and to hire more nurses. While the government has taken pains to link its policy retreats to the deficit, the SES poll suggests many voters are blaming McGuinty personally.

When asked what, if anything, they disliked about the new premier, 27 per cent of survey respondents said 'broken promises'; 19 per cent said 'nothing'; six per cent said 'weak'; three per cent said 'inexperienced'; two per cent said 'everything'; and 39 per cent were 'unsure.'

Nanos said the high number of people with negative or no opinion about McGuinty suggests he's failed, so far in his rookie term, to define himself with voters.

"There's a lack of clarity and consistency," he said.

McGuinty couldn't be reached for comment and a spokesman in the premier's office declined comment saying public opinion polls should "speak for themselves."

Garfield Dunlop, Whip for the Conservative caucus, said "there's no way on God's green earth" the Liberals could keep all the promises they made.

"I personally believed all along that there was no way McGuinty could keep his promises," Dunlop said.

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