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Monday, May 31, 2004

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## Conservatives to unveil \$5.5B defence proposal

Tories, Liberals in 'statistical tie': poll

Sean Gordon, Robert Fife And Jack Aubry, With Files From April Lindgren  
CanWest News Service

May 31, 2004

OTTAWA - The Conservatives will unveil a four-year, \$5.5-billion defence plan today that would add another 25,000 troops by 2008.

Stephen Harper's Tories, who have pulled into a "statistical tie" with the Liberals in the latest public opinion poll, will promise an immediate addition of \$1.2- billion a year to the military, and another \$1.2-billion for each of the first three years of a Tory first term. In the fourth year, it would boost spending by \$1.6-billion.

The platform also provides for greater parliamentary involvement in the military and in decisions to deploy soldiers overseas.

"A Conservative government will set a long-term target of 80,000 personnel, along with simultaneous increases in reserve personnel levels," reads the policy outline.

The Canadian Forces' current strength is about 52,000 uniformed personnel. The defence



Prime Minister Paul Martin laughs with a supporter as he leaves a rally at a campaign stop in Quebec City during the weekend.

CREDIT: Jonathan Hayward, The Canadian Press

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budget is at almost \$13-billion.

The Conservative plan also provides for a new method of parliamentary oversight of military deployments abroad.

All missions that involve sending Canadian troops on combat missions overseas would have to be ratified by Parliament, and the House of Commons' defence committee would be given broader powers to review annual spending and vet senior staff appointments.

"This is about enhancing our security and sovereignty," the party policy document says.

The Tories' defence plan is the first in a series of policy announcements the party is expected to make this week. "We're going to have pretty much one [announcement] a day, just like vitamins," an unnamed Conservative campaign official said.

Mr. Harper will announce the details of his military plan in Trenton, home to one of the country's largest air bases.

Mr. Harper has long said he wants Canada's military spending to rise to meet the NATO average of 2% GDP, but insists he has no intention of trying to accomplish that goal in one mandate.

Canada currently devotes 1.2% of GDP to military expenditures, and most experts predict it will take a decade of reinvestment to meet the NATO average.

Party officials say Mr. Harper will spend the bulk of the next seven days in Ontario. After Trenton, he will head into the all-important "905" area, the clutch of about 20 ridings that ring Toronto and stretch into the Niagara Peninsula.

Conservatives hope to further narrow the gap with the Liberals in Ontario -- where party strategists believe they can scoop up as many as 30 seats.

A new opinion survey, conducted by SES Research for the Parliamentary television channel CPAC, suggests the party may want to set its sights even higher.

The nationwide poll, conducted on Friday and Saturday, suggested Liberal support has plunged seven percentage points to 34% since the May 23 election call, while the Conservatives were listed at 31% among the 600 people surveyed.

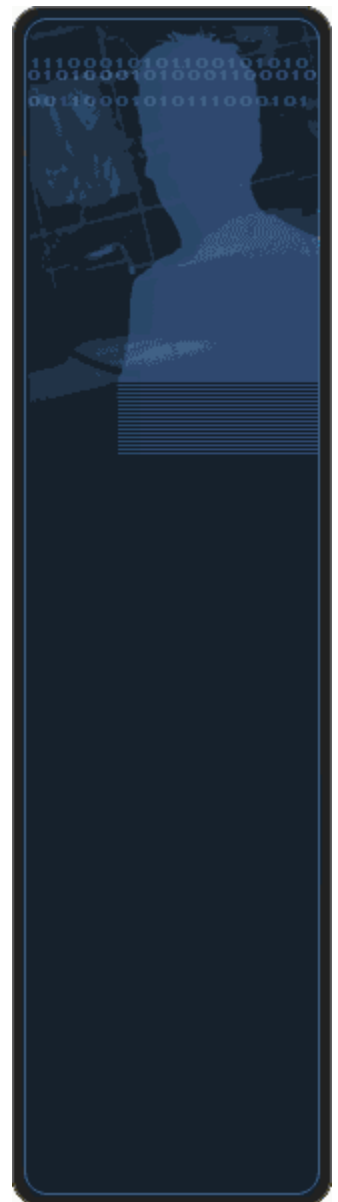
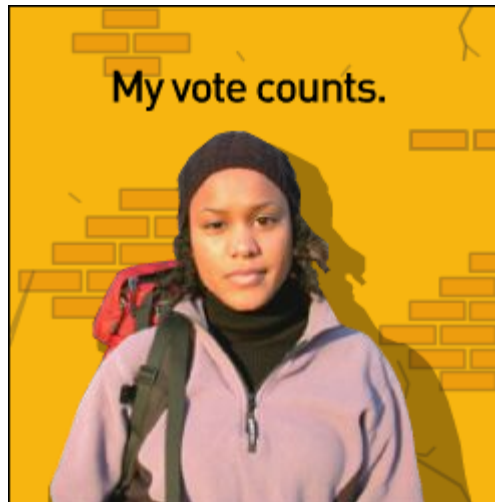
The poll has a margin of error of 4.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, meaning the two parties are in a virtual tie, said pollster Nikita Nanos. The poll put the NDP at 19% and the Bloc Quebecois at 12%.

Mr. Nanos attributed the falling Liberal fortunes to Dalton McGuinty, Ontario's Liberal Premier, who broke an election promise not to raise taxes and imposed higher health care premiums in his budget this month.

"There is obviously some spillage on what is happening provincially to federally. It has to do with trust and the Liberal brand," he said.

"Federally, the Liberals have just come off the advertising scandal. Now in the week they

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have launched their campaign, the provincial Liberals broke many of their campaign promises. So you have a conjunction of Liberals and trust and really bad timing."

The Conservative party's growing hopes of winning a possible minority government has some members thinking beyond the June 28 vote. Peter MacKay, the party's deputy leader, suggested yesterday that the Tories might be prepared to consider some arrangement with the Bloc Quebecois.

"I believe you have to approach that on a case-by-case basis," he said on CTV's Question Period. "You have to look at the issue."

The Liberal drop in opinion polls has prompted calls within the party, including from two former Liberal Cabinet ministers, for Paul Martin to make sweeping changes to his election campaign team.

Herb Dhaliwal, the former natural resources minister, yesterday urged the Prime Minister to clean out his election team, which he said has been running a bad campaign.

"I've said right from Day One that we are looking at a minority government," said Mr. Dhaliwal, who is not running in this election. "[Mr. Martin] has serious problems, no doubt about it, and he has got to show that he is going to make changes."

Brian Tobin, another former minister in Jean Chretien's Cabinet, also said Liberal election prospects are not looking good.

Mr. Dhaliwal, a Chretien supporter, said the Martin team made a serious mistake in raising public expectations of the new Prime Minister in the early days of the government but "he [Mr. Martin] has not met those expectations."

Mr. Dhaliwal said Mr. Martin's initial unwillingness to reach out to Chretien loyalists is causing serious internal rancour, and levelled part of the blame on David Herle, the Liberal campaign co-chairman.

He said Mr. Herle should never have advised the Ontario Premier on the budget that jacked up health care premiums as high as \$900 per person. Mr. Martin has admitted Mr. McGuinty told him in advance about his plan to break an election pledge and impose the higher premiums.

Yesterday, Mr. McGuinty said he spent just "20 seconds" giving the Prime Minister advance notice of a new health care tax in Ontario's budget and that Mr. Martin did not comment on the measure.

"I did not spend any more on the matter of our budget than possibly 20 seconds, simply giving the Prime Minister a courtesy heads-up," Mr. McGuinty said.

"It [the conversation] was not with a view to eliciting any kind of reaction or advice, it was just to let him know that I'd made a very difficult decision," Mr. McGuinty told reporters.

Liberal MPs say the fallout from the Ontario budget has hurt them and other polls suggest party support is crumbling in the province where the Liberals won 98 of the 103 seats in the last election.

One well-known southern Ontario MP, a strong Martin supporter, said he has been receiving panicky calls from fellow Liberals upset at Mr. Herle and his team.

"They're a bunch of juvenile delinquents who don't seem capable of shooting straight. I'm not quite sure who the brain might be -- well I'm not quite sure there are any brains," said

the MP, who asked not to be named.

Mr. Dhaliwal said Liberals are also in trouble in his native British Columbia, where they had initially hoped to win all 36 seats in the province. "Now they are down, according to the polls, to 10 [seats] and I think they will be lucky if they win a seat," he said.


However, John McKay, a Toronto-area Liberal MP, said the situation is not as dire as it seems, although he admits people are angry about the Ontario budget.

"You get up in the morning and you read the newspapers and you say: 'Oh man, this is going to be a tough day,' and then you go walk the streets and knock on doors and it doesn't turn out to be so tough after all," the Scarborough-East MP said.

He said voters come around after he explains Mr. Martin's record of lowering taxes, eliminating the deficit and improving Canada's productivity.

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