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**Grits taking a thumping from sponsorship scandal:
Sun Media/SES poll**

By **KATHLEEN HARRIS**, SUN OTTAWA
BUREAU

- NDP's star is rising - new poll
- Love lost between Layton and PM

OTTAWA -- The Liberal brand is taking a heavy beating from the sponsorship scandal as Canadians brace for a snap election campaign.

A Sun Media-SES Research poll finds that 43% of furious Canadians tar the entire Liberal Party with the kickback scheme that ripped off millions of taxpayer dollars - a 13% jump since the spring.

Another 48% believe only a "few bad apples" are to blame for the corruption - a 10% slide over the same period.

The poll also found that while fewer Canadians think Prime Minister Paul Martin is exclusively to blame for Adscam, a majority believe he shares responsibility for the scandal with his predecessor, Jean Chretien.

On May 4, 29% thought Martin was solely to blame for the scandal compared with only 8% on Nov. 13, two weeks after Gomery tabled his report. Another 24% fingered Chretien, while a whopping 54% of Canadians believe the pair is mutually responsible.

SES president Nik Nanos said the survey results will force Grit strategists to

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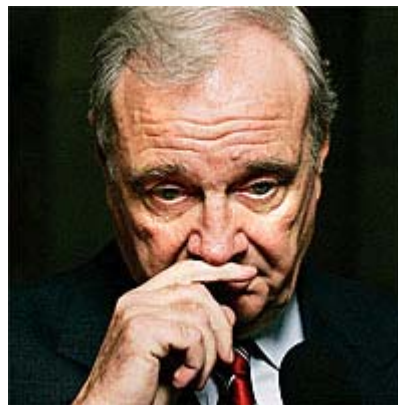
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LETTER TO
THE EDITOR



Prime Minister Paul Martin ponders a question from a reporter in Ottawa yesterday after holding a meeting with his cabinet on Parliament Hill. (CP photo)



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downplay the party logo and talk up their leader as the campaign unfolds in coming weeks. That could prove to be a challenge, since the three pillars of any election are party, policy and leader.

"When you take one away, you're on a two-legged stool. You take another away, you're on a one-legged stool," he said.

"There will be a lot of weight on Paul Martin's shoulders. If he makes a mistake during the campaign, it could mean serious trouble for the Grits."

Nanos said the figures show Canadians are willing to give Martin a "bit of a break," but not ready to let him off scot-free.

Conservative MP John Reynolds said Canadians are right to be skeptical.

"People just will not believe that (Martin) didn't know," he said. "He did what he did in calling the inquiry so he could blame Chretien. How do you exonerate the finance minister later on because he didn't know what was going on, yet he sat in the room while they put together a program that Gomery said shouldn't have happened?"

Liberal Party national director Steven MacKinnon admitted the Grit brand has been damaged, but noted that Gomery concluded a "small identifiable group" was responsible for Adscam. "Very clearly what we have to do is continue on our quest to regain Canadians' trust," he said.

The poll was conducted by SES Research in two waves: between April 30 and May 4 in random telephone interviews of 1,000 Canadians and between Nov. 10 and 13 in a random telephone survey of 1,003 Canadians.

The poll is considered accurate within 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

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