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NEWS

Thu, September 2, 2004

'Meaningless'

KEITH BRADFORD, EDMONTON SUN

The Klein government's \$500,000 survey on spending in a debt-free Alberta contains so many leading questions that results will have to be taken with a pinch of salt, says a polling expert. About 1.4 million It's Your Future questionnaires have been mailed to Albertans with the aim of getting public input on taxes and how future surpluses should be spent.

"There's some wording in some of the questions that doesn't really lend itself to unbiased questions," said Nikita James Nanos, head of SES Research.

"Really, you have to take this type of survey with a grain of salt. It would probably be better characterized as a consultation meant to engage and educate respondents as opposed to being a representative sample of opinion."

The survey, the third on money matters in the past six years, asks respondents to give a priority rating to a series of questions, including "provide a quality, affordable Alberta health-care system," "provide an outstanding education system" and "build a more diverse, innovative economy."

It also asks about the importance of providing refunds to every Albertan - and invites people to list three things the government could do for Alberta's future.

"It's a bit of a polling truism to ask people whether they think there should be affordable health care, just from a research standpoint," said Nanos.

"You are only going to have limited value in that, in the results. Who in their right mind would say it's a low priority to have a diverse and innovative economy?"

Alberta Finance spokesman Jerry Bellikka said the questions weren't designed to get specific results.

"If you scrutinize just about anything far enough and read between the lines you can find something in it that some expert feels has got some skulduggery to it," he said. "That certainly wasn't the idea behind this."

Alberta Health spokesman Christianne Dubnyk said plans for a separate fall consultation on health care will now be postponed until the results of this survey have been assessed.

The government also wants to look at how flexible the feds are willing to be on health-care funding, she said.

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Klein said last week that he'd received \$9 billion in spending requests from the public since declaring the province would soon be debt-free.

The results of the survey are expected to be made public by October and there has been speculation that an election will be held shortly afterwards.

Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said the results will be "meaningless" because of the way the questions are phrased.

"It's an exercise in political propaganda."



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