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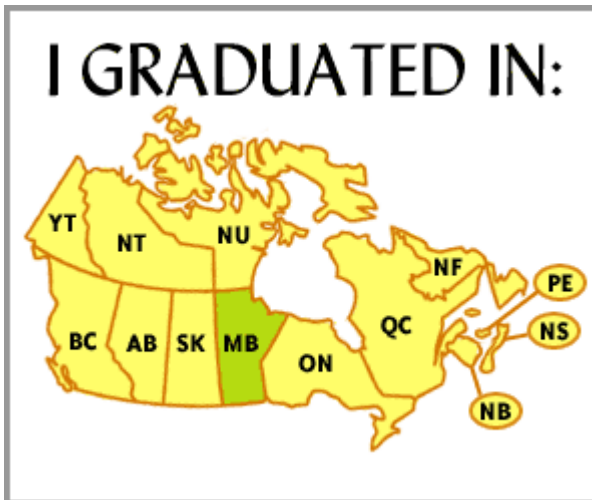
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Harper frontrunner in poll

**BILL RODGERS, Free Press Parliamentary Bureau
and news services**

2004-02-05 03:28:56

OTTAWA -- Stephen Harper is the first choice of Canadians if they could vote in the Conservative leadership race, according to an SES/Sun Media poll. When asked to rank the "profiles" of the three candidates, based only on their political or private-sector experience and ability to speak both official languages, 41 per cent preferred Harper's resume. Former Ontario cabinet minister Tony Clement ranked second at 26 per cent. Both Clement and Harper, the former Canadian Alliance leader, speak English and French. Unilingual former auto parts executive Belinda Stronach placed third with 20 per cent.



Of the 1,000 Canadians surveyed last week, 12 per cent were undecided.

The poll also asked Canadians who they would prefer "to be the next leader of the Conservative Party of Canada" based on name recognition. The results pushed the telegenic Stronach, who has received saturated media coverage, into second place with 20 per cent.

Harper's lead shrinks to 27 per cent, while Clement drops to 13 per cent. The number of undecided voters jumps to 36 per cent.



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The survey shows Clement is a relative unknown in the West and Atlantic provinces. All three Conservative candidates are in a virtual dead heat in Ontario with 24 per cent supporting Harper, 21 per cent favouring Clement and 19 per cent feeling Stronach would make the best leader of the party.

"Regardless of how you introduce the ballot, Stephen Harper is the frontrunner in this race," said SES President Nik Nanos.

"Tony Clement does much better based on his profile than based on his name recognition, which means that . . . as he increases his profile, his support is likely to increase at the same time."

Nanos said the survey shows Stronach, who didn't get into the public spotlight until last month, "has run a masterful media campaign."

But her carefully scripted campaign for the leadership of the new Conservative Party of Canada was under attack yesterday from rivals who say she's afraid to engage in free-wheeling televised debates.

Stronach won't be appearing on any network-hosted debates with Harper and Clement, though her campaign team insisted yesterday she has "no trouble with debating."

"If we do (Newsworld), then we have to do CTV and Global and others," said Geoff Norquay, a Stronach spokesperson.

"Doing six or eight debates is just over the top."

Stronach is committed to two party-organized debates -- the first on Feb. 21 in Ottawa -- which will adhere to a more tightly scripted format than the casual round-table discussions favoured by television hosts. The Conservatives choose a new leader March 20.

But Harper and Clement say Stronach is doing herself, the race and the party a disservice by turning down the network opportunities.

"I believe that anybody who wants to take on Paul Martin is going to have to be available whenever the media calls to stand front and centre and take on the competition," Harper said in Montreal.

Clement, campaigning in Halifax, blamed Stronach's reticence on the influence of her many campaign handlers. "I think the more opportunity that Canadians have to judge us, that's part of the political process to assess the candidates and judge them on their merits, that's a good thing," said the former Ontario health minister.

The SES/Sun Media poll released yesterday was conducted Jan. 26-29 and is considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

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