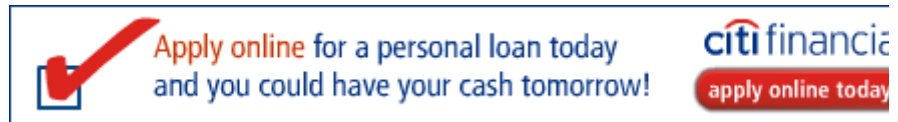


# THE Review

Monday, June 02, 2003

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## Time for change at Queen's Park: Poll

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By James Wallace

Monday, June 02, 2003 - 02:00

**Local News** - TORONTO – Ontario voters believe the provincial Conservative government has grown long in the tooth and more than half think it's time for change at Queen's Park, a poll by Osprey News/SES Research has found.

The poll also found Ontarians are split on whether spring is the right time for an election campaign, but most believe Ernie Eves' Conservatives are on the wrong track in dealing with health care, education and the environment.

When it comes to law-and-order issues, taxes and job creation – traditional core issues for the Tories – the majority of voters believe the government is on the right track.

Nikita Nanos, president of SES Canada Research, said public appetite for a change in government has been building over the past year. "Every government has a best-before date and there has to be a reason for re-electing a government," Nanos said.

The Osprey News/SES Research poll found 52 per cent of Ontario voters believe it's time to change the provincial government, 32 per cent believe the Conservatives should be re-elected and 15 per cent are undecided.

"It has been eight years and I think the average voter senses the government doesn't have the same focus it had in the first five or six years of its mandate," Nanos said.

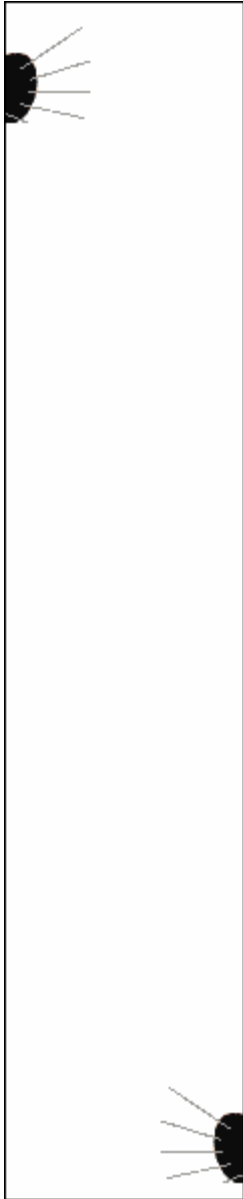
Former Premier Mike Harris brought Ontario's Progressive Conservative party to power in 1995 after convincing voters his Common Sense Revolution was the prescription to counter NDP tax hikes, a ballooning deficit, weakening economy and troubled social programs. Harris won a second term in 1999, but stepped down last year.

The party reins were picked up by his former finance



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Eves, who has fallen just behind Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty in popularity, Osprey News revealed on the weekend.

Eves has faced criticism, both from the opposition parties and some elements of his own caucus, for shelving a planned June election to deal with SARS and a teacher lockout at Toronto's Catholic school board. However, the Osprey News/SES Research poll, conducted this past week, found election timing isn't as big a deal with voters.

The poll found 48 per cent want an election held now but 42 per cent believe it should be later and 10 per cent are undecided.

What the numbers mean is that waiting until later in the summer or fall won't hurt the government's chances for re-election, Nanos said. If Eves chooses to postpone an election until next spring, which would bring the government to the end of its five-year mandate, that may be a different story, he said.

Despite having hiked spending on health care and education to record levels, the government has failed to win broad credibility on issues that appeal most to centre-of-the-road voters.

The poll found 47 per cent of voters believe the government is on the wrong track on health care compared to 39 per cent who see health care on the right track and 14 per cent who are undecided.

On education, the numbers are identical and on the government's handling of the environment, 41 per cent feel the Tories are on the wrong track compared to 32 per cent who answered right track and 27 per cent who were uncertain.

"The best the conservatives can hope for is to neutralize those issues," Nanos said. "They were elected on a tax platform, that's their strength."

However, on law-and-order issues, taxes and job creation, the Conservatives enjoy broad support. The poll found 50% of Ontario's voters believe the government is on the right track on law-and-order issues compared to just 24 per cent who see the government on the wrong track and 26 per cent who are undecided.

On taxes, the Conservative tax-cut mantra is supported by 47 per cent of voters as opposed to 30 per cent who see the government on the wrong track and 23 per cent who are unsure.

Voters believe the government is doing the right thing on job creation, with 47 per cent support compared to 28 per cent who think the government is on the wrong track and 25 per cent undecided.

Nanos said the Conservatives, who have the overall support of just 32 per cent of Ontario voters at this time, are "eating" into the core Liberal support when it comes to law-and-order, taxation and job creation.

More broadly, the public is not clear about what the Conservative party now stands for and recent efforts by Eves and his government to focus on "softer" issues such as health care and education have failed to find traction among voters.

"In the absence of a clear ballot question, all people are doing is

making a decision based on what they see in the news,” Nanos said. And what they see is increased disenchantment on a number of fronts, ranging from controversy over hydro, SARS, West Nile and the provincial budget.


“Ernie Eves hasn’t made a major blunder or major mistake,” Nanos said.

“But little mistakes, they add up,” he said. “It’s like death by a thousand paper cuts.”

The poll of 500 Ontario voters was conducted May 26 and May 27. It is statistically accurate within 4.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 and was registered with the Canadian Survey Research Council.

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