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Martin leads Grits down SES/Sun survey shows scandals taking toll as PM weighs election options

By **MARIA McCLINTOCK**, Parliamentary Bureau

A RAPIDLY declining number of Canadians believe Paul Martin would make the best prime minister and an increasing number view his government's performance as poor, an SES/Sun Media poll shows. Martin's poor showing among the 1,000 Canadians polled between April 20 and 25 is directly related to the sponsorship scandal, according to SES president Nik Nanos.

The poll comes as the PM hosted a private dinner with his cabinet ministers at 24 Sussex Dr. last night to canvass their advice about the timing of an election. The poll numbers show 33% of Canadians think Martin would make the best PM -- a drop of 17 points since February.

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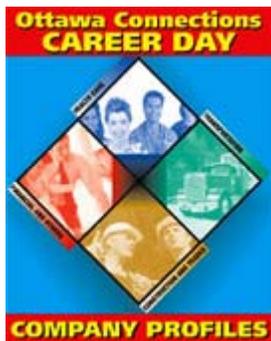
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SUN SPECIALS



PERFORMANCE RATING

Asked about Martin's overall performance, 31% said it was poor or somewhat poor, compared to 13% in February.

Twenty-five per cent think the PM's performance is somewhat or very good, down from 30% two months ago.

When asked to rank Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, 16% of those surveyed said he'd make the best PM -- double the number who chose him in February. NDP Leader Jack Layton was the choice of only 7%, an increase of only 2%.

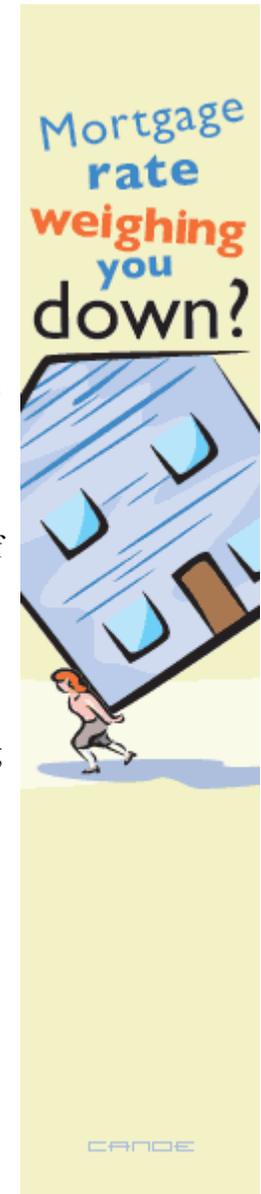
One of the most significant findings shows 11% of people thought none of the party leaders would make a good prime minister, and another 31% were undecided.

"What the numbers speak to is volatility and when we see the number of undecided voters increase ... that's basically a bit of a thermometer reading of how volatile the situation is," Nanos said.

The poll is accurate within plus or minus 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

Meanwhile, a separate SES/ CPAC poll conducted during the same period shows 60% of Canadians are dissatisfied with Martin's handling of Adscam.

"Canadians have ... gotten a better indicator of what type of performance to expect from Paul Martin, and this clearly shows he's got a problem," Nanos said.



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SILENT BUNCH

The prime minister served up a discussion during dinner that likely included one of the principal planks of a Liberal campaign: Health care.

"This was a very substantive political discussion, I must say one of the best substantial political discussions I've seen in my years here in Ottawa," Health Minister Pierre Pettigrew said after the two-hour meeting ended.

Pettigrew laughed off questions about any consensus on the timing of an election.

Cabinet is largely divided over the timing of an election with many Ontario MPs wanting a quick vote while others are urging the PM to wait at least until the fall.

Results of a recent poll conducted by SES Canada Research Inc. show that only a third of Canadians now feel that Paul Martin will make the best prime minister:

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