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Sun, August 28, 2005

**Canucks turned off****Summer barbecues are fine and dandy, but Martin and Harper can't seem to rustle up any supporters, Maria McClintock writes**By **MARIA MCCLINTOCK**, Parliamentary BureauE-MAIL  
TO A  
FRIENDPRINT  
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THE EDITOR

AN UNOFFICIAL federal election campaign is all but under way, but there's a problem: Canadians have tuned out and are turned off by federal politics.

If you're Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, that spells trouble. If you're Prime Minister Paul Martin, you thank your lucky stars and hope the disinterest continues long enough to erode voter anger over the sponsorship scandal.

Over the summer, a series of national polls have showed the Grits in the lead -- hovering around the 35% to 38% range -- with the Tories pulling up the rear in the 28% to 30% range.

But neither Harper nor Martin have made any significant gains, and observers say this is because voters were turned off by the sponsorship program and the political shenanigans that went on in the House of Commons in June.

The polls also highlight something that troubles political strategists of all stripes: About 20% of those polled consistently say they are undecided about who they would choose.

While there was speculation at last week's Liberal caucus retreat in Regina about what it would take to regain a majority government, it's widely believed that it's unlikely the Grits can recover the required seats in Quebec and B.C. to pull it off.

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**Results**



Pollster Nik Nanos of SES Research said while interest in the Gomery commission and Adscam has faded over the summer, it will resurface again when Justice John Gomery issues his first report on the Adscam inquiry in November.

"This is still a vulnerability for the Liberals," Nanos said.

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"It's kind of (like) going to a restaurant and not liking anything on the menu. People that aren't voting are going to walk out and go hungry ... then people will be forced to choose the best of the worst. At this point, the Liberals are really the default choice for a lot of Canadians."

An SES poll completed Aug. 8 put the Grits at 39%, the Tories at 25%, the NDP at 19%, the Bloc Quebecois at 13% and the Greens at 5%, among committed voters. The undecided came in at 14%.

"The Conservatives spent all their time attacking the Liberals, and they never really put forth anything to Canadians on how they would be different from Paul Martin. Unless you get out the message on how you would be different ... why would people change their vote?" Nanos said.

#### 'POLITICAL TROUBLE'

It would be "political trouble" for anyone trying to force an election earlier, he added.

"Once Gomery reports, then people will judge Paul Martin and his government and then they will also start taking a look at Stephen Harper to see whether he has what it takes to be prime minister."

Liberal Party executive director Steven MacKinnon said the Gomery commission is not a "dead" issue but the party recognizes there's a long road to overcome the damage it has caused to the Grit brand -- especially in Quebec.

"We can take nothing for granted," said MacKinnon.

"It is a volatile electorate. Canadians are taking a wait-and-see attitude ... when Canadians stack up Paul Martin to Stephen Harper ... then we will be able to earn back some of the trust that, granted, was eroded through some of the sponsorship issue."

#### WINTER VOTE WOES

MacKinnon argues the Liberals' record on health care and child care, and its cities agenda, will convince voters the Grits are the most competent party to govern.

A simple calculation puts the election smack in the middle of winter, and that could create new troubles for the PM, said University of Calgary Prof. David Taras.

"What's keeping this government afloat is that people just don't like the alternatives ... and they're the least offensive alternative to Canadians," Taras said.

"It could be an election where there's a very low voter turnout, where the politicians literally have trouble going door to door, and we could have a heating and energy situation, where the government will be in a very tough position and will have to make some tough choices.

"You can see that being the 800-lb. gorilla that could just walk into the Liberals' living room and sit down," he said.

Tory MP Monte Solberg agreed that Harper's summer barbecue tour doesn't seem to be paying any dividends, according to the polls -- but he's confident that'll change.

"I think the polls should be taken with a grain of salt and a short whiskey. Pollsters might get accurate results if they ask about favourite barbecue sauces or how the Jays are doing, but politics is low on the agenda," Solberg said.

"Once the House gets back, I think the summer groundwork that Stephen Harper did will start to pay off."

But Taras warns: "The Liberals will play up their track record on health care and their cities agenda and say, 'Elect us.'

"And Canadians seem prepared to do that."

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