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Tue, February 8, 2005

NHL's not so cool: Poll

One in six fans plan to watch fewer games when lockout ends, survey says

 By **MARIA McCLINTOCK**, Parliamentary Bureau

The NHL lockout isn't scoring with frustrated fans, with one in six overall saying they'll be switching to other entertainment when the game returns, a new national SES/Sun poll shows. Of the 1,000 Canadians surveyed in the new poll, 629 said they were hockey fans. When asked how much NHL hockey they'd be watching when the lockout ends, 16.4% of fans planned to look for something else to do.

"What it's shown is that over the course of the lockout there's a certain part of the NHL fan base that has been exploring alternatives, and based on the poll that we completed last week, will be doing something else other than watching hockey," said SES president Nik Nanos.

"They're giving up on the NHL. From a strictly business point of view, can the league sustain a potential loss of 16% of its market?"

Ontarians will harbour the biggest grudge, with 21.8% seeking alternatives. Atlantic Canadians are

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most forgiving at 10.1%, while 17.1% in Western Canada and 10.6% in Quebec say they'll switch.

Not everyone, however, thinks the post-lockout picture will be that bleak.

"You have to keep in mind what percentage of Canadians actually do watch hockey," said John Shannon, vice-president of programming and executive producer of Leafs TV. "On a good night, Hockey Night In Canada will pull in two million viewers. That's out of 12 million total viewers, so that number (of hard-core hockey fans) is already lower.

"But I think those people who say they are upset would come back."

FATE HANGING

The poll was conducted between Jan. 28 and Feb. 2 and is considered accurate within plus or minus 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

With the fate of the 2004-5 season hanging in the balance, the federal government is prepared to provide professional mediators in an effort to end the lockout, Labour Minister Joe Fontana told the Sun yesterday.

"The time of no return is approaching very, very quickly and if both parties are thinking of the game, are thinking of the people that are affected ... perhaps that might be the motivating factor," said Fontana, a Montreal Canadiens fan.

"If they should call for mediation services, I'd be more than happy to provide it to them."

While the labour minister is keen to help mediate a settlement, Liberal MP and NHL Hall of Famer Ken Dryden said he doubts the feds could play a meaningful role.

"It's been something that we've thought about occasionally, but I think



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the problem that the parties have is that they are so philosophically widely separated that I'm not sure where the conversation begins," he said.

HOCKEY 'HABIT'

Dryden also said the lockout has taught many fans that their love for the game isn't as deep as they thought.

"I think that there are a number of fans in this country who have sensed over the last number of months that actually maybe it was more habit than it was passion."

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