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Sun, May 23, 2004

All about leadership Issues to take back seat in campaign: Pollster By **STEPHANIE RUBEC**, Parliamentary Bureau

FOR THE Liberals, it's all about keeping Paul Martin's foot out of his mouth and voters away from the polls. Forget about issues like health care and gas prices. The first few weeks of the upcoming election campaign are going to be about leadership.

With Liberal support sagging, experts say the governing party must make sure its leader shines for the full campaign, or else it will be stuck with a minority government or even in the opposition.

Pollster Nick Nanos, president of SES Research, says the outcome of the election, expected on June 28, will hinge on which party leader trips up first and how well this weakness is exploited.

"Luck counts in this game," Nanos says. "Right now, I'd say the luck is with (Conservative Leader) Stephen Harper. Because this last (Ontario) Liberal budget is really top-of-mind for Ontario voters."

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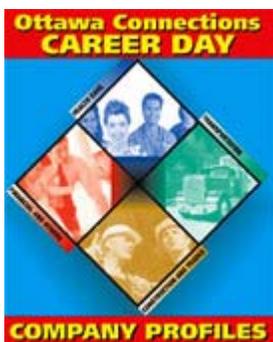
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SUN SPECIALS



The Liberals have conducted airtight federal election campaigns since Jean Chretien took the party to victory in 1993. They have also been blessed with bungling opposition leaders.

Nanos says voters traditionally reward smoothly run campaigns, pointing to their punishment of former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day in the 2000 election. Day became famous for poorly executed publicity stunts, such as when he used Niagara Falls as a backdrop to claim Lake Erie drains from north to south, just like the brain drain. He was taken aback when told that the water actually flows the other way.

"If you can't run a campaign, what makes you think you can run a country?" Nanos asked.

Nanos says Canadians will scrutinize Harper and he expects they'll give the newly minted Conservative leader the opportunity to prove he's got the right stuff to be prime minister.

As for NDP Leader Jack Layton, Nanos says he must convey the message that "he's the real conscience of the Canadian people," Nanos says.

The big battles are going to happen in Ontario ridings taken by the Liberals in the 2000 election when the former Tory and Alliance parties split the vote.

"It's going to be a tough election for everyone," Nanos says.

"The two big question marks are Ontario and Quebec."

To improve the Conservatives' odds in Ontario, Harper will spend much of the campaign holding rallies and making speeches across the province.

The Liberals fear that with a united right, and a stronger NDP, they could lose up to 30 rural and Toronto-area ridings in the province.

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In Quebec, where the Bloc Quebecois has a sizable lead in the polls, the Liberals are banking on low voter turnout to at least hold on to their seats.

A June 28 election could play into the Liberal strategy. It comes days after Quebecers have celebrated St-Jean Baptiste Day and are more interested in planning their summer vacations than casting a ballot.

University of Ottawa political scientist Francois-Pierre Gingras also points out the Bloc has strong support among young Quebecers, who are less likely to vote.

"Usually a low turnout is favourable to the party in power," he says.

ADSCAM FACTOR

Gingras also says the Grits have no choice but to feature Martin and fade out the party logo since Canadians now associate the federal Liberal Party with scandals, such as Adscam. Martin has to show he's running a very different show than Chretien.

But with a united right and a charismatic Layton, Martin is under pressure from both sides.

"Paul Martin does have some advantages over Jean Chretien in that sometimes he is perceived as a new person --ironically enough," Gingras says.

And Gingras says Martin has found the secret recipe to winning support among skeptical voters.

"He has been vague enough that everyone can hear what they want to hear," he says.

But Gingras says all bets are off on election predictions until at least the leaders' debates, which are expected in mid-campaign.

By that time, Canadians will have had a chance to see how each leader performs during the hectic campaign schedule and whether they can hold their own in a vigorous debate.

"Whether they do trip, that will reinforce the view that this is not serious, and it will drive voters away," he says, noting that would be

good for the Grits.

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