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Fri, May 6, 2005

Grits' lead growing: Poll Liberals widen gap over flagging Conservatives to more than six points in latest opinion survey

By BILL RODGERS, Parliamentary Bureau

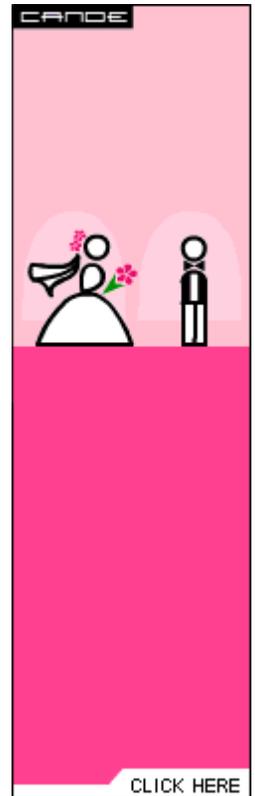
WHAT WILL it take for Canadian voters to get so mad at the Liberals that they'll boot them out of office?

Apparently, not a daily dose of corruption and scandal.

Paul Martin's party has put the brakes on the damage caused by sensational allegations of influence-peddling and kickbacks to people in high places and is actually heading back up in public opinion, an SES Research poll released on CPAC yesterday suggests.

The nationwide survey of 1,000 voters completed on Tuesday shows the Liberals have stretched their lead to six points over the Conservatives compared to a Decima poll released Tuesday, which had the Grits leading by three percentage points.

The SES national standings had the Liberals garnering the support of



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36.1% of decided voters, the Conservatives 29.5%, the NDP 17.9%, the BQ 12.2% and the Green Party 4.3% of those surveyed.

The poll, which is considered accurate to within plus or minus 3.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20, puts the number of undecided voters at 12.2%.

"We're entering into very turbulent waters," SES pollster Nik Nanos told the Sun.

"What the polling shows is that Canadians flirted with the Conservatives (last month) but for the Conservatives, it's just not enough to say that they're not the Liberals and tap into anger."

ONTARIO LEAD WIDENS

The Liberals have regained their lead over the Conservatives in vote-rich Ontario, with SES showing them at 43.7%, the Tories at 31.1% and the NDP moving up to 22.6%.

Meanwhile, the prime minister branded allegations he directed contracts to Liberal-friendly ad firms in Quebec as a "smear." The PM's denial was issued yesterday following the weekly meeting of cabinet.

"I have never interfered in any contract and I have made that very clear," Martin told reporters.

Chuck Guite, the former head of the scandal-plagued sponsorship program, testified at the Adscam inquiry that it was his understanding that Martin and former public works minister Alfonso Gagliano had agreed in 2000 to keep a certain amount of Finance Department advertising business with the ad firm Vickers and Benson.

Guite said he came to that conclusion after speaking with Gagliano and later with the public works minister's chief of staff, who has since died.

The opposition pounced on the Guite testimony in the House of Commons yesterday, calling it proof Martin was involved in the sponsorship scandal.

"Regardless of the prime minister's denial, here are the facts," said Conservative Leader Stephen Harper. "Chuck Guite testified the prime minister interfered in contracts and we know that money did flow to

Vickers & Benson."

'THIRD-HAND HEARSAY'

The PM shot back that Harper was trying to destroy reputations based on the "third-hand hearsay" of a dead man.

Public Works Minister Scott Brison said the latest assertions are proof that Justice John Gomery should be allowed to submit his report next fall on the scandal before any judgment is passed.

"I think Canadians prefer to wait for Justice Gomery's report, and not to rely on testimony from the dubious about the deceased."

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