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Latest News

Liberals hit turbulence

Campaign team needs election makeover, PM told

Robert Fife And Jack Aubry

CanWest News Service

May 31, 2004

OTTAWA -- The Liberals are in a virtual tie with the Conservative party amid growing rancour within Liberal ranks for Prime Minister Paul Martin to make sweeping changes to his election campaign team.

A new public opinion survey by SES Research for CPAC -- Canada's parliamentary TV channel -- of 600 people on Friday and Saturday show Liberal support has plunged seven points to 34 per cent since the May 23 election call.

The Conservatives led by Stephen Harper are at 31 per cent, but with a plus and minus error of 4.1 per cent 19 time out of 20, pollster Nikita Nanos said the two parties are in a "statistical tie."

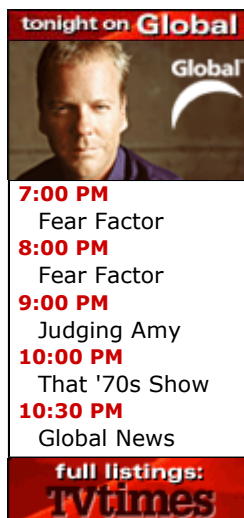
Nationally, the NDP are at 19 per cent and the Bloc Quebecois at 12 per cent.

The Liberal free-fall is largely attributed to the decision of Ontario Premier

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Dalton McGuinty to break an election pledge not to raise taxes and to impose higher health premiums in the provincial budget.

"There is obviously some spillage on what is happening provincially to federally. It has to do with trust and the Liberal brand," Nanos said in an interview. "Federally, the Liberals have just come off the advertising scandal. Now in the week they have launched their campaign, the provincial Liberals (in Ontario) broke many of their campaign promises so you have a conjunction of Liberals and trust and really bad timing."

In the face of tumbling polls, two former Liberal cabinet ministers sounded a warning about the party's failing campaign. Former natural resources minister Herb Dhaliwal on Sunday urged Martin to clean out the Liberal election team which he blames for running a bad campaign.

"I've said right from Day 1 that we are looking at a minority government," said Dhaliwal, who declined to run in this election. "(Martin) has serious problems, no doubt about it, and he has got to show that he is going to make changes."

Brian Tobin, another ex-Liberal minister, said Sunday Martin's election prospects aren't looking good with all signs pointing to a minority government.

Dhaliwal said Martin's team made a serious mistake in over-selling the new prime minister in the early days of the government but "he (Martin) has not met those expectations."

Dhaliwal added Martin's initial unwillingness to reach out to loyalists of former prime minister Jean Chretien is causing serious internal problems and he levelled part of the blame on campaign co-chair David Herle.

Herle ran Martin's leadership campaign but Dhaliwal questioned whether he has the ability to run a national election campaign. "The very people that win you the leadership are not necessary the people who are going to win you the election," he said.

However, Liberal deputy campaign director Steve McKinnon said there are no plans for Herle to leave the campaign

Dhaliwal added Herle should never have advised McGuinty on the budget that jacked up health premiums as high as \$900 per person. Martin also admitted McGuinty told him about his plan to break an election pledge and impose higher premiums before the budget was tabled.

But on Sunday, McGuinty said he spent just "20 seconds" giving the prime minister advance notice of the new health-care tax in Ontario's budget and that Martin did not comment on the measure.

McGuinty said he did not press Martin for additional federal health-care funding to eliminate the need for the premium. The prime minister, he added, said nothing upon learning of the new tax.

Tobin said his less-than-positive comments on CTV's Question Period only reflect the recent polls, adding it wouldn't pay "to pretend there's not an election on."

Liberal MPs say the fallout from McGuinty's budget has hurt them and polls

show party support crumbling in the province where the Liberals won 98 of the 103 seats in the last election.

A well-known southern Ontario MP, who is considered a strong Martinite, said he's been receiving panicky calls from fellow MPs who are upset at Herle and his team.

"They're a bunch of juvenile delinquents who don't seem capable of shooting straight. I'm not quite sure who the brain might be -- well I'm not quite sure there are any brains" he said, asking not to be named.

"They think they're pretty smart -- I think it's a group who have been in this leadership mode, and know how to count heads and that sort of thing but now that they have arrived, they don't know what to do."

Seat projections show the Liberals poised to win 67 of Ontario's seats compared to 34 for the Tories and five for the NDP. Nationally, the Liberals would win 135 seats to 98 for the Conservatives, 54 for the BQ and 21 for the NDP.

At dissolution, the Liberals held 168 seats in the House of Commons, while the Conservatives held 73. The Bloc Quebecois had 33 and the New Democrats held 14. There were also nine independents and four vacancies in the 301 seat Commons.

This election will see an increase of seven seats in the Commons.

Dhaliwal, a former B.C. MP, said Liberals are also in trouble in British Columbia where they had hoped to win all 36 seats. "Look at B.C., they said they were going to win all the seats in B.C. Just two weeks ago that's what David Herle said. Now they are down, according to the polls, to 10 and I think they will be lucky if they win a seat," he said.

However, Ontario Liberal MP John McKay said the situation is not as dire as it seems at least in his Scarborough-East riding.

"You get up in the morning and you read the newspapers and you say: 'oh man this is going to be a tough day' and then you go walk the streets and knock on doors and it doesn't turn out to be so tough after all," he said.

Angry voters come around after he explains Martin's record of lowering taxes, eliminating the deficit and improving Canada's productivity, he said.

McKay would not venture an opinion on Herle's handling of the campaign or his decision to provide strategic and polling advice on the Ontario budget.

"Politics is a funny business. When you win, it doesn't matter how you manage and what kind of a bum you were for the previous five weeks. All is forgiven," he added.

McKay said the Liberals have also been helped by NDP Leader Jack Layton's pledge to scrap the Clarity Act and his "shoot-from-the-hip" assertion Martin is responsible for the death of 100 homeless people in Toronto.

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