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Grits face uphill fight: poll

Public has soured on government, premier, poll finds

By James Wallace/Osprey News Network

Local News - Saturday, February 12, 2005 @ 11:00

Four out of 10 Ontario voters dislike Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty because they believe he lied to them, suggests a poll by SES Research.

A string of broken election promises and legislative lack of focus has quickly soured voters on the new McGuinty government, said SES president Nik Nanos.

"When a government focuses on pit bulls and snack food in school cafeterias, it's hard really to convert that into a vision for the future for the province," Nanos said.

"Part of the problem for the Liberals is that they've really failed to define themselves on any major issue.

"They've been tinkering with small issues but they haven't been able as of yet to leverage a definition or vision for the future on any of the big issues such as health care and education."

The poll found just 18 per cent of Ontario voters think McGuinty is doing a good job.

The majority — 41 per cent — figured the premier's performance was average while 37 per cent think he's doing a poor job running the province.

With Ontario's Legislature returning to work on Tuesday, McGuinty and his government will have their work cut out to change public opinion.

The poll delved in detail into exactly what voters like and don't like about the Liberal Premier.

Voters were asked to use a word to describe both feelings and came up with the following.

One out of five — 22 per cent — said they liked "nothing" about McGuinty and 43.8 per



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cent were unsure what, if anything, they found to admire in him.

"The Liberals have a huge branding issue related to their leader that they have to turn around," Nanos said.

"To have a leader go into an election and to have four out of every 10 Ontarians think that he's inconsistent, or as someone who has lied, is just a huge negative."

Probing deeper, about five per cent found McGuinty "honest" and four per cent thought he "works hard."

Another four per cent like the premier because they feel he is "doing the right thing" and slightly less believe he is "a nice man."

Just 2.8 per cent commended McGuinty for having "good ideas" but more people (2.6 per cent) ranked the premier's good looks over his leadership attributes (1.8 per cent), doing a good job (1.6 per cent), a "fresh face" (1.2 per cent) or having the courage to say he was wrong about certain things (one per cent).

The premier was lauded for being "an average guy" by one per cent of voters but fewer than one per cent find him "caring, fair, a straight talker or intelligent."

Other attributes that fell under the one per cent mark included "family man, listens, tries hard, a federalist, balancing books and getting things done."

While the Liberals did break major promises, raising taxes by \$2.4 billion and running a \$5.6 billion deficit after pledging in the election to do neither, McGuinty may not deserve all the negativity he's receiving, Nanos said.

"I think it has to do with people's perceptions about politicians in general," he said. "We've seen provincial and federal politicians break their word."

The Opposition Conservatives and NDP have also been effective "feeding the fire on the negative perceptions of Dalton McGuinty in being perceived as someone who breaks his word," Nanos said.

But if voters had little praise for the premier, they did find lots to dislike.

To begin with, 41 per cent said the quality they disliked most about McGuinty was that he "lied." A third of voters were unsure what, if anything, they disliked.

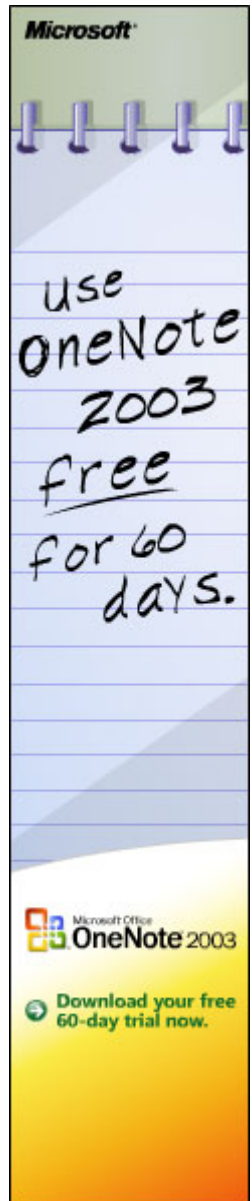
Just more than five per cent slammed the premier for being "weak," 3.8 per cent said he was "doing a bad job," 2.6 per cent felt he is "all talk" and 2.4 per cent cited "bad policies."

Another 2.4 per cent thought McGuinty has "done nothing" while two per cent labelled him as "arrogant" and 1.8 per cent suggested they disliked "everything" about the Liberal premier.

Nanos said the numbers are bad enough to pose a real hurdle to Liberal re-election hopes. An election is slated for fall 2007, but the party needs to begin work now to patch up its image and the image of its leader, he said.

"It would require a major initiative built around Dalton McGuinty," Nanos said.

"If I was looking at this polling result and was a Liberal strategist, I would say if we want to win the next election we have to start a full-out campaign immediately with advertising and a tour."



The only good news is that voters are not particularly enamoured either with the Conservatives or the NDP.

Both the Liberals and Conservatives are statistically tied around the 40 per cent mark in popularity and the NDP stands at about half that amount.

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