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Aug. 23, 2005. 07:50 AM

McKenna tops Liberal leader poll

Ontarians prefer NDPer Bob Rae as
Martin successor
Peter MacKay chief rival for top
Conservative post

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

REGINA - Canada's ambassador to the U.S., Frank McKenna, is seen as the prime contender to replace Prime Minister Paul Martin, according to a poll conducted for the *Toronto Star*.

Though Ontario voters leaned more heavily toward former New Democrat premier Bob Rae to take over the top Liberal post, McKenna is the clear favourite nationwide, with 23 per cent of respondents saying he'd be the right man to replace Martin, who turns 67 on Sunday. Among Liberal voters, that number jumps to 28 per cent.

For Conservative leader Stephen Harper, 46, his chief potential successor is a little closer to home — maybe too close for those who get nervous about internal caucus rivalry.

Deputy Tory leader Peter MacKay, 39, narrowly edged out former Ontario premier Mike Harris and former New Brunswick premier Bernard Lord when Conservative voters were asked to think about possible replacements for Harper.

The poll, conducted earlier this month by SES Research Associates, presented respondents with a list of candidates to replace Martin and Harper, even though there is no suggestion that either is ready to walk away from his job.

Both leaders have said they intend to run in the next election, but a raucous

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past year of minority government — with major setbacks on either side — provoked rumblings about the need for new leadership.

McKenna, 57, has neither ruled in nor ruled out the possibility of taking a run at the leadership once Martin is through, but the poll shows he has the profile to consider it seriously.

"McKenna has a clear lead among Canadians generally and Liberals in particular," says SES president Nik Nanos.

However, the poll also shows that overwhelmingly, people are mostly undecided about who could replace Martin or Harper.

Nanos said that "more than four of 10 Canadians" were undecided.

He says this could be evidence of a lack of serious leadership talent in the wings of both parties, or the product of a public that isn't yet seriously looking to have another leadership race federally any time soon. The years from 2000 to 2004 were filled with leadership intrigue and contests in the Tory and Liberal camps and these current years were supposed to bring a measure of stability.

Also of note, no women appear on the radar screen yet for either leadership contest.

"For the Tories, not one female successor was identified by any of the 1,000 Canadians surveyed," Nanos said.

Some women did pop up among suggested Liberal replacements, including Michaëlle Jean, the woman due to become the next governor general, along with Human Resources Minister Belinda Stronach, Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan and the colourful former minister Sheila Copps, who stayed until the bitter end in the 2003 Liberal leadership contest only to end up being forced out of federal politics.

The poll, conducted through telephone interviews with 1,000 voters across Canada, is considered accurate within three percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The Liberal candidates presented to respondents were: McKenna, Rae, former finance minister John Manley, former justice minister Martin Cauchon and Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff, who addressed the Liberals' big convention in Ottawa last March and who has reportedly started actively considering a run for the leadership whenever it does take place.

Only in Ontario did McKenna fail to come out on top, with 20 per cent favouring Rae as Martin's replacement and 17 per cent choosing the former premier of New Brunswick, who governed from 1987 to 1997.

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Meanwhile, on the Tory side, respondents were also presented with five names: MacKay, Lord, Harris, Quebec Premier Jean Charest — a former leader of the federal Tories — and one-time leadership candidate Jim Prentice, now an Alberta MP.

Among Conservative voters, MacKay is the runaway favourite, with 30 per cent of Tory-leaning respondents saying he should take over from Harper.

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