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Mar. 29, 2005. 06:42 AM

Taxpayers pan Ottawa

Most lean to cities, provinces to handle taxes, poll shows
Amid Gomery probe, big spending, little faith in Ottawa

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

OTTAWA—Most Canadians believe provincial and municipal governments would spend their tax dollars more fairly than Ottawa, according to a *Toronto Star* poll.

Only 17.2 per cent of Canadians chose the federal government as the place where they would opt to send their tax dollars — a pointed snub to Ottawa as the annual income-tax deadline looms at the end of next month.

A full 32.8 per cent of Canadians believe their provincial governments most fairly spend taxpayers' dollars, the poll shows, while another 31.9 per cent say their local municipal government is best placed to spend public money.

The poll was conducted for the *Star* by SES Research.



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Prime Minister Paul Martin's minority government has been engaged in an aggressive effort to make the federal government relevant in Canadians' lives, with ambitious spending plans for health, child care and municipalities over the next few years.

This newest poll from SES however, shows it will be an uphill struggle for the government to convince Canadians this spending will be done wisely.

"The challenge for the federal government is that, although the Liberals focus on their responsible fiscal track record, only a minority of Canadians choose the federal government compared to provincial and municipal levels of government," says SES president Nik Nanos.

"Provincial and municipal governments, those levels of government closest to delivering services and with whom Canadians have more direct interaction, were noticeably more likely to be positively viewed by Canadians as spending tax dollars fairly."

The poll also comes while the Gomery inquiry is holding hearings in Montreal, with testimony about government misspending in the sponsorship scandal.

The poll results also don't provide a lot of comfort to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty's new "fair share" campaign against his Liberal cousins in Ottawa, even though he has been trying to argue that the federal surplus has been earned on the back of beleaguered provinces such as his own.

For while more Ontarians would choose to send their money to the province than the federal government, the SES poll shows, an even larger number would be happy to send to neither — choosing their local government as the most capable at spending tax money.

Just 16.5 per cent of Ontarians chose the federal government as the destination for their taxes and 22.3 per cent chose the provincial government.

But a full 36.7 per cent of the respondents in Ontario said they thought their local governments would most fairly handle their money.

Only in British Columbia is that local-preference number higher, at 38 per cent — a reflection, perhaps, of the emerging strength of municipal governments in Toronto and Vancouver.

"Although still ahead of their federal counterparts, the McGuinty Liberal government received the lowest comparative provincial government score," Nanos noted.

"Conversely, Quebecers, Albertans and Atlantic Canadians were the most likely to choose their provincial government ahead of municipalities and

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the federal government."

The poll was conducted from March 17 to March 22, among 2,000 Canadians from all provinces.

The results are deemed accurate to within 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The margin of error is higher for regional samples.

In Quebec, the provincial government was heavily favoured as the destination for taxes, with 43.2 per cent support, compared to 17.4 per cent for the federal government and 20.6 per cent for municipal government.

Albertans also show high support for provincial tax spending, with 39.5 per cent favouring that government and 34 per cent municipal tax spending.

Alberta also registers the lowest support for sending tax dollars to Ottawa, with only 15 per cent in favour of the federal government.

The highest support for the federal government as tax spender came, perhaps surprisingly, in British Columbia, with 20.7 per cent support.

The Atlantic region, long viewed as the stronghold for opinion in favour of strong central government, seems to have soured on Ottawa's role as tax-dispenser.

Only 16 per cent of respondents in the Atlantic region said Ottawa would spend their money most fairly.

Thirty-nine per cent favoured provincial governments and 30.5 per cent said municipal governments.

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