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Stalled PM shifts gears Harper shuffles cabinet as SES-Sun Media survey shows majority government remains beyond his grasp



By KATHLEEN HARRIS, NATIONAL BUREAU

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OTTAWA -- A majority government remains out of reach for the federal Conservatives, a new poll shows as Prime Minister Stephen Harper prepares to revamp his cabinet and build momentum before the next election.

The exclusive SES-Sun Media survey shows the Tories' popularity crept up four percentage points to 36% in the last quarter, but they are still virtually neck-in-neck with the Liberals, who are stalled at 33%. The NDP sank four points to 13%, while the Greens slipped to single-digit status at 8% and the Bloc Quebecois rose just one point to 10%.



Prime Minister Stephen Harper reveals his new cabinet line-up at a swearing in ceremony today at Rideau Hall. (CP)

SES president Nik Nanos said since the numbers appear stuck for the Conservatives, the timing is likely right for Harper to rejig his cabinet and map out new priorities for the fall. But the static scores show Harper might also be wise to delegate more front-line authority to his ministers to avoid wearing every unpopular issue like the war in Afghanistan.

"If I was looking at these numbers I would be saying it's important for Stephen Harper to shift gears and start focusing on the team," he said. "To elevate, from a public profile point of view, some of his senior cabinet ministers -- because right now he has no buffer between himself and these issues."

On the leadership front, the poll shows Harper has slipped marginally as Canadians'

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top pick for PM. About 31% of those polled think he'd make the best leader, down slightly from 33% three months ago. Liberal Leader Stephane Dion climbed to 23% from 15%, while Jack Layton dropped one point to 18%.

With an eye to gaining ground to majority territory, Harper is expected to shift under-performers and promote political prowess when he overhauls his inner circle today. Senior government officials remained tight-lipped on who's going where, but all eyes are on embattled Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor. Embroiled in controversies over Afghan detainees and paying for funerals for fallen soldiers, O'Connor is the favourite for a major move.

But one Tory insider believes the shuffle, which could affect a dozen or more ministers, is as much a chance to reward star performers as it is an opportunity to fix a perceived "problem."

Junior ministers, including secretaries of state Jason Kenney and Helena Guergis, could be in line for greater roles. Revenue Minister Carol Skelton of Saskatchewan will likely be dropped from cabinet after announcing she won't seek re-election, but Harper is not expected to bring in new blood from the back benches to fill the spot.

The cabinet-making routine must achieve regional and gender balance, but another senior government source said Harper aims to raise the profile of ministers with strong communication skills. If O'Connor is pulled from the key defence file, possible replacements are Jason Kenney, Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice, Industry Minister Maxime Bernier and Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day.

With law and order a top priority in the fall, Rob Nicholson could move out of Justice. Treasury Board President Vic Toews has also been rumoured to take up the public safety file when the new line-up is sworn in at a Rideau Hall ceremony this afternoon.

The SES-Sun Media telephone poll of 1,001 Canadians was conducted from July 28 to Aug. 4.

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