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Sun, August 22, 2004

Poll speaks for Tories' silence

CONSERVATIVES 'ON VACATION' AS SUPPORT SLIDES

By BILL RODGERS, OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

THE SUMMER disappearing act of Conservative Leader Stephen Harper and his party has some members grumbling as a new poll shows the party's popularity dropping in every region but Western Canada. The SES/Sun Media poll of 1,000 Canadians taken earlier this month has the Conservatives' national support dipping by four points to 26% from the party's 30% showing in the June 28 election.

The drop is even steeper in vote-rich Ontario, where support has tailed off to 27% from an election-day high of 32%.

"The last time voters heard from the party this summer was when Leader Stephen Harper was musing about stepping down," said one frustrated senior Conservative.

"And at the same time, the words of Randy White were still ringing in voters' ears."

White, a British Columbia MP, landed Harper's campaign in hot water just days before the election for remarks he made about gay marriage, use of the notwithstanding clause and the role of the courts.

A spokesman for Harper refused to discuss the poll numbers.

"We're going to stick to our general rule. We're not going to comment on poll numbers," said Harper's press secretary Carolyn Stewart-Olsen.

SES pollster Nik Nanos says he isn't surprised by the party's downward slide, noting the Conservatives haven't been pro-active since the election, allowing Paul Martin's minority Liberal government to keep the Commons dark for three months, with hardly a whimper of protest.

"They've gone on vacation," Nanos said.

The last image Canadians have of Harper's Conservatives, he said, is a

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party under blistering attack by the Liberals in the final days of the campaign for slip-ups on bilingualism, abortion and how it would handle the gay marriage issue.

"In the last 10 days of the election, they got beat up by the Liberals and they haven't done anything to respond to or rectify that," Nanos said.

On the other hand, the Grits have spent the summer as if the election campaign had never ended.

"If an election is 18 months away, you can't throw away three months," Nanos said.

The poll shows Martin's Grits with the support of 38% of committed voters. The party has made post-election gains in every region of the country except Quebec. The New Democrats are also up slightly since the election, with 17% of committed voter support.

The survey was conducted Aug. 5-11 and is considered accurate to within 3.1%, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

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