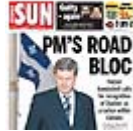


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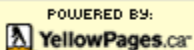
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Thu, November 23, 2006

**No love lost for Liberals**

By GREG WESTON

As federal Liberals attempt to give their party a fresh face with a new leader, a national public opinion poll suggests large numbers of Canadian voters are not yet ready to forgive and forget the Grits' scandal-plagued past.

An SES Research survey conducted this month for Sun Media found that even among Canadians who voted Liberal in the last election, almost half still describe their party of choice as "arrogant" and "corrupt."

SES pollster and political analyst Nik Nanos says the survey findings "should be a huge wake-up call for the Liberal party."

"They might be dealing with who the next leader is going to be ... but obviously they still have some fundamentals to sort out in their core brand."

Open-ended survey

The unusual open-ended survey — there were no pre-set answers to choose from — asked voters what words they would use to describe their likes and dislikes about the Liberals.

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The answers were not particularly flattering. Nationally, 33% said the words "corruption" and "scandal" describe what they dislike most about the Liberals.

Not only was corruption by far the single largest "dislike" among voters polled in the survey, but it was also the paramount diss of the Grits by past supporters of each of the federal parties.

The next most prevalent gripe about the Grits came from the 9% of those polled who said the party was "arrogant" and "hasn't changed."

Other failings of the party most often cited were divisions over leadership, bad policies, broken promises, and "weak, bad government."

Perhaps most telling, Liberals were their own harshest critics.

Fully 48% of Liberal supporters listed corruption, scandal and arrogance as the things they dislike most about the party they voted for in the last election only 10 months ago.

Sleazy past

The Liberals' apparent disdain for their own sleazy past exceeds even that expressed by past Conservative voters (41%) and New Democrat supporters (40%), and is about the same as the negative feelings that 47% of Bloc Quebecois electors still harbour towards the Grits.

On the flipside, what voters seem to like most about the as-yet-leaderless Liberals are their policies that are generally seen as "moderate" and "flexible."

Other accolades for the Grits would best be described as tepid, things like "they are okay," and the Liberals are "as good as any other party."

Notably, the top Liberal party attribute most often cited by past supporters of the Conservatives, NDP and Bloc was "nothing."

Pollster Nanos says that despite the fact the Liberals and Conservatives are virtually tied in overall public popularity at the moment, the latest SES survey should sound a loud warning bell for the Grits as they head into their leadership convention.

Canadian voters are effectively torn between "two imperfect choices," he said, and that is no reason for either the Liberals or Conservatives to celebrate.

On the one hand, voters are welcoming Conservative efforts to clean up government, but are uncomfortable with some of the Tory policy positions in areas such as the environment, Afghanistan, and Canada-U.S. relations.

On the other hand, Canadians still see a Liberal Party with more appealing policies, but "with some serious baggage," as Nanos puts it.

The need for radical change within the federal Liberal party has certainly not been lost on the current leadership race where three of the four top contenders are outsiders who weren't even members until recently.

No quick fix

But Nanos warns that simply changing the Liberal leader won't fix what ails the Grits.

"The Liberals may be feeling pretty good about the numbers showing they are competitive with the Conservatives, but what these latest numbers show is it is very premature for them (Liberals) to think they're out of the woods, or that Canadians have even forgiven them."

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As for the Conservatives, Nanos says, the message from the SES survey on Liberal strengths and weaknesses is equally clear.

“There is a great big bull’s-eye on the Liberal brand.”

Letters to the editor should be sent to feedback@ott.sunpub.com.

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Published by Sun Media Corporation, a Quebecor Media company
at 6 Antares Dr., Phase 3, Ottawa, Ont., Canada, K1G 5H7
Publisher Rick Gibbons; Editor-in-chief Mike Therien

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