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Jun. 12, 2004. 01:00 AM

In politics, misery loves company

Unhappy times for federal and provincial Liberals

[IAN URQUHART](#)

[Paul Martin's](#) federal Liberals aren't the only ones in free fall; so are Dalton McGuinty's provincial Liberals.

A poll released this week by SES Research shows that the provincial Liberals have dropped precipitously and are now in second place, with the support of 34 per cent of decided voters — down 15 points from the previous poll — compared with 41 per cent for the Conservatives.

(Some 500 randomly chosen Ontarians were surveyed May 29 and 30 for this poll. A sample of this size is accurate within 4.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.)

Even worse news in the poll for the provincial Liberals is what it says about McGuinty.

He has slipped below lame-duck Conservative Leader Ernie Eves, for goodness' sake, as the voters' top choice for the job of premier. Indeed, McGuinty is running behind even "don't know" in this category, although he is still ahead of NDP Leader Howard Hampton.

And only 9 per cent of voters rate McGuinty's performance to date as "good" or "very good" compared with 54 per cent who think it has been "poor" or "very poor."

This 9 per cent figure has been misrepresented by other media and by the opposition parties as an "approval rating," which would represent a historic low for a politician in Canada. (Brian Mulroney's approval rating as prime

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minister once dropped to just 12 per cent.)

But voters were not asked by SES Research whether they "approved" or "disapproved" of McGuinty's performance. Rather, the question posed was: "Based on his performance to date, would you describe the job he has done as very good, good, average, poor or very poor?" Some 32 per cent rated it as "average." It is a big stretch to interpret their answer as "disapproval."

Still, the numbers for McGuinty in the SES Research poll are bad enough.

And worse numbers are on the way when Ipsos-Reid reports next week.

"The SES polling is directionally on line with what we've seen," says John Wright, senior vice-president of Ipsos-Reid. "But ours is decidedly more negative."

What's the reason for this fall from grace for the provincial Liberals, who won a convincing majority barely eight months ago with 47 per cent of the popular vote?

The answer, of course, is last month's budget, with its tax increase in the form of a "health premium."

A recent EKOS Research poll conducted for the Star found that 54 per cent of Ontarians saw the budget as "bad" or even "terrible" versus just 14 per cent who viewed it as "good." (Apparently, no one thought it was an "excellent" budget.)

But it is not the content of the budget — with its combination of the health premium and heavy new spending on health care, education, infrastructure and the environment — that is bugging people. Pre-budget polls and the Liberals' own extensive use of focus groups showed that Ontarians were willing to pay more in taxes if the money were tied to improved services, particularly in health care.

Rather, what is damaging the Liberal government is a lethal combination of the following:

★**Broken promise.** McGuinty said during last fall's election campaign that he would not raise taxes, and then he reversed himself in the budget. Furthermore, he has refused to apologize for the broken promise (which he has blamed on the Tories and their hidden deficit) or to hold a referendum on it. Today's EKOS poll in the Star says that this is what sticks in most people's craw.

★**Delisted services.** While the budget plowed more money into health care, it also delisted certain services from OHIP coverage: chiropractic, physiotherapy and optometry. The juxtaposition of these delistings with a

health premium is also galling to the voters.

★ **Slow delivery.** While news of the health premium and the delistings was instantly spread, the government has been slow off the mark on the "good news" announcements flowing from the budget. A free vaccination program for children, for example, was not unveiled until this week — 23 days after the budget.

★ **Preoccupied media.** Many of the government's good news announcements have been ignored or buried by the media, who are preoccupied with the federal election. The vaccination announcement, for example, didn't make The Globe and Mail or the National Post, and the Toronto Sun ran it on page 36.

In response to this, McGuinty has ruled out any change to the budget. "We stand by the budget as presented," he said in the Legislature this week.

At the same time, however, he expressed the hope that, "as more and more people come to understand what we are doing for them through this budget," their antipathy toward him and his government will wane.

McGuinty may be right. He has time on his side, with more than three years to go before the next election.

But the polls suggest he has dug himself an awfully deep hole. It won't be easy for him to climb out of it.

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