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ONTARIO VOTERS SUPPORT NEW NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS: POLL

By James Wallace
Osprey News Network

A majority of Ontario voters support building new nuclear power stations in Ontario, an SES Research/Osprey Media poll has found.

It reveals 41 per cent of Ontario residents believe the province needs more nuclear power, compared to 23 per cent who oppose further nukes and 27 per cent who are content with our current complement of nuclear generation.

"The environment that we're in right now is that we have rising electricity rates, we're going to have rising heating costs," said Nik Nanos, president of SES Research.

"As a result, I think it's fair to say that there's an appetite for the Province of Ontario to seriously explore more nuclear power," Nanos said.

Premier Dalton McGuinty strongly hinted earlier this month that his government intends to turn to nuclear address the province's urgent and growing need for power.

Ontario is encouraging the development of "Green" generation (primarily wind and small hydro-electric) but already resorted to brown-outs this summer and will be forced to decommission its aging stable of nuclear stations by 2020.

New nukes take 12 to 15 years to build.

The government has asked the Ontario Power Authority to create a 20-year plan for electricity supply in this province and the authority is due to release its report in December.

"We are prepared to go ahead with economical, safe, new nuclear if that is recommended by the OPA," McGuinty said during a Niagara Falls press conference two weeks ago.

It is widely anticipated the OPA report will recommend just that.

However, the nuclear debate is fraught with political peril particularly along gender lines.

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"The polling shows there's a very clear gender gap on this," Nanos said. "It shows 52 per cent of men support more nuclear power while only 30 per cent of women want more nuclear power."

Male support, such polling usually finds, is based on "dollars and cents" factors while female support is more influenced by impacts on health and society.

"The numbers that are driving male support have to do costs and the future and being ready for the future while women are probably more likely to be concerned about the potential implications and risks of nuclear energy," Nanos said.

For the Liberal government, several factors will influence their ability to broadly convince the public to support a new round of public investment in nuclear energy.

To begin with, while four in ten Ontario's support the nuclear option there is still a relative majority that either opposes more nukes, supports the status quo or are unsure one way or the other.

That suggests the government still has a big sales job to do.

Secondly, the government has not yet committed on whether new nuclear stations would be publicly or privately-built, which will take the debate in a whole other direction.

Thirdly, the gap between male and female support is politically problematic for the Liberals whose power base relies heavily on women voters.

"They have to tread very carefully on this issue to make sure they don't alienate female voters," Nanos said.

"The Liberals also have to be careful because if males in Ontario are driving the nuclear appetite for cost considerations, they don't want to come out with a plan that is outrageously expensive," he said.

Many Ontarians still remember the enormous costs overruns incurred during the last round of nuclear construction in this province. The Darlington nuclear station completed in 1993 was a decade overdue and \$12 billion over budget.

The NDP, which opposes new nuclear power, will be a lightning rod for the no-nuke vote.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives run the risk of alienating their core supporters if the cost of a new nuclear program is perceived to be excessive.

"They have to be careful also that this isn't just another white elephant," Nanos said.

A detailed breakdown of poll can be obtained at www.sesresearch.com. It was conducted between Sept. 15 and Sept. 19, 2005 by telephone with 504 Ontarians and is considered accurate within 4.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

James Wallace is the Queen's Park bureau chief for the Osprey News Network.

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