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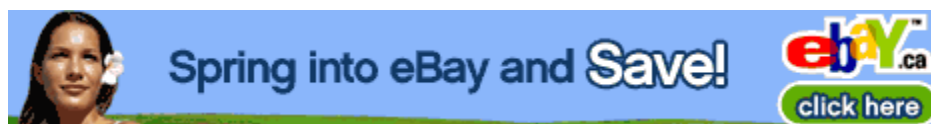
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Fri, May 6, 2005

Grits coming back: poll
Regain lead in vote-rich Ontario
By **BILL RODGERS**, OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

The Martin Grits have put the brakes on damage caused by sensational allegations of influence peddling and kickbacks and are coming back in public opinion, an SES Research poll released on CPAC suggests.

The nationwide survey of 1,000 voters completed on Tuesday shows the Liberals have stretched their lead to six points over the Conservatives, compared with a recent Decima poll, which had the Grits leading by three percentage points.

The SES national standings of the major political parties now looks like this: Liberals 36.1%, Conservatives 29.5%, the NDP 17.9%, the BQ 12.2% and the Green Party 4.3% of decided voters surveyed. The poll puts the undecided number at 12.2%.

"What the polling shows is that Canadians flirted with the Conservatives (last month) but for the Conservatives, it's just not enough to say that they're not the Liberals and tap into anger," SES pollster Nik Nanos told Sun Media.

ALLEGATIONS TERMED 'SMEAR'

Paul Martin's Liberals have regained their lead over the Tories in vote-rich Ontario with SES showing them at 43.7%, the Tories at 31.1% and the NDP moving up to 22.6%.

Meanwhile, the prime minister branded allegations he directed contracts to Liberal-friendly ad firms in Quebec as a "smear." The PM's denial was issued



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yesterday following the weekly meeting of cabinet. "I have never interfered in any contract and I have made that very clear," he told reporters.

Chuck Guite, former head of the sponsorship program, testified at the AdScam inquiry it was his understanding Martin and former public works minister Alfonso Gagliano agreed in 2000 to keep a certain amount of Finance Department advertising business with the ad firm Vickers and Benson. Guite said he came to that conclusion after speaking with Gagliano and later with the public works minister's chief of staff, who has since died.

The Opposition pounced on the Guite testimony in the Commons, calling it proof Martin was involved.

Meanwhile, the Tories carried on with efforts to topple the Liberals. In a manoeuvre at a committee yesterday morning, the Tories were able to get an amended motion of non-confidence. Commons Speaker Peter Milliken ruled the motion out of order.

But later in the day, he ruled in favour of Conservative Leader Stephen Harper's motion that effectively says the government should resign. That motion is expected to come before MPs the week of May 16.

Liberal House Leader Tony Valeri said the budget bill will be tabled in the Commons today and will return to the House next week, fuelling more speculation that a non-confidence vote could happen within days.

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