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Late June vote seems likely

Election may be irresistible for Harper

But public doesn't want one, poll finds

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OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The freefall in Liberal support captured in today's poll means many things for political leaders, but for voters, mostly this: a likely late June election and a replay of the major themes of the last campaign.

Here's why.

That scenario may be irresistible to Conservative Leader Stephen Harper who must consider whether to trigger the collapse of the Liberal minority government this spring, or wait until the fall after barbecue season or later next year.

By late May, three things viewed as impediments to an election call will have happened. The May 17 British Columbia provincial election will be over. The Queen's royal visit to Saskatchewan and Alberta, set for May 17-25, will be completed.

And most importantly, Justice John Gomery will have finished hearing testimony from witnesses in Montreal in what has turned out to be the most damning phase of the inquiry for the Liberal Party of Canada.

Gomery is not expected to issue written reports on the sponsorship program until late fall. But he is expected to wrap up with witnesses May 27.

Last year's election call, by Prime Minister Paul Martin, who was then in search of his own majority, came on May 23, and the vote was held June 28, right before Canadians went to campgrounds and cottages.

Pollster Frank Graves believes the only obstacle to an immediate election is the fact his survey shows most Canadians do not want one right now.

'There is little immediately apparent ... to suggest a way back for the Liberals.'
Frank Graves, EKOS research

"The only finger in the dike for the Liberals is a clear conviction by the public that an immediate election is not wanted," says Graves, president of EKOS Research. EKOS conducted the poll for the *Star* over three days after the most damning details became known Thursday afternoon. According to the survey, only 15 per cent say the election

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should be called now, while 62 per cent say an election should wait until the inquiry's report comes out. The rest — 23 per cent — do not think this issue justifies an election. "Voters are adamant that they want to hear the whole Gomery story before going to the polls," says Graves. But he also notes that voter impatience with an early election call may be a relatively easy irritant for the Conservatives to dispel.

"There is little immediately apparent in the political environment, however, to suggest a way back for the Liberals," says Graves.

Senior Tories already say the Liberal government has lost the "moral authority to govern." It's a question of how soon the public comes around to believing the same. Several top Tories say the end of public testimony at the Gomery inquiry may suffice. Harper's own party's approval number — 40 per cent — has never been so good since the merger of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives in December 2003. Party strategists believe the image Canadians have of Harper remains, to a certain extent, undefined — although most concede the Liberal scare-mongering after the last campaign succeeded in "branding" the party as "scary" to some left-of-centre voters.

The party's March policy convention, they say, goes a long way to deflecting that criticism. And Harper, they feel, simply has to appear like a "reasonable, smart alternative" to persuade angry voters to take a chance on him, says one senior Tory. The Tories are also in fairly decent shape to finance another campaign. The party has paid off its 2004 campaign line of credit, has \$2 million cash on hand, and this year will receive a public subsidy, based on the 2004 vote, and an election expense rebate from Elections Canada totalling \$16.6 million.

Last year, the themes that dominated the campaign were clear from the start. The Liberals attacked Harper's Tories as "extremist" and Harper defended his party as a "modern, moderate and mainstream" alternative to Liberal "waste, mismanagement and corruption."

Harper has already begun to use those same lines in speeches in the past three weeks.

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