

B.C. Liberals take 50-point lead over NDP: poll

The survey indicates only 17 per cent of B.C. voters support the government

Craig McInnes Vancouver Sun

VICTORIA -- A new opinion poll gives Gordon Campbell's B.C. Liberals an unprecedented 50-point lead over the New Democrats.

The poll released Monday by McIntyre & Mustel Research Ltd. found 67 per cent of decided voters support Campbell's Liberals, while only 17 per cent support the NDP.

The poll, which surveyed 500 B.C. residents between Oct. 17 and 21, also found Dosanjh was chosen by just 30 per cent of respondents as the best leader, compared to 50 per cent for Campbell. That's a change from other polls where Dosanjh has done as well or better than the Liberal leader on a personal basis.

When respondents were asked about the question of top concern -- health care -- 39 per cent said Campbell would do a better job, compared to 19 per cent for Dosanjh, who dropped 10 points on that issue since the last McIntyre and Mustel poll in August.

The level of support indicated in the poll would mean a Liberal government with no opposition if an election were held now, according to Bernard von Schulmann, a political consultant.

Von Schulmann conducted an analysis last year that showed the NDP would win only four seats if its popular support was 27-28 per cent.

"There's no way the NDP would hold any of those [four seats]," he said Monday when told of the new poll results.

"I've never heard of a party getting 67 per cent in the polls."

Frank McKenna's Liberal party got 62 per cent of the vote when it swept all 58 seats in the New Brunswick legislature in 1987.

The last time a B.C. party got more than 50 per cent of the vote was in 1949, when the Coalition party got 62 per cent. The party did not sweep the legislature, however, because of the way the votes were concentrated.

That is not the case now, Barb Justason, a partner in McIntyre & Mustel, said Monday.

"The B.C. Liberal vote is spread quite consistently around the province," she said.

The drop in support for the NDP, to 17 per cent from 21 per cent, was within the margin of error of the poll, which was plus or minus 4.5 per cent, with a 95-per-cent confidence level.

But the jump in support for the Liberals -- from 53 per cent in August to 67 per cent -- is significant. So is the plunge in the support for Bill Vander Zalm's B.C. Reform Party, which fell from 19 per cent to 10 per cent.

Dosanjh declined to comment on the poll results. Vander Zalm questioned their validity and Campbell said he feared they might nurture complacency.

"Obviously, it's encouraging to see these kind of results, but as I've said many times, the only poll that counts is election day. There has not been a time in B.C. when the NDP hasn't got over 30 per cent and there hasn't been a government in the last 50 years that got over 50 per cent, so our job is to continue to work to unite the opposition to the NDP and give people a sense of hope and opportunity in this province."

Justason said support for the Liberals continues to be based on anti-NDP sentiment.

"We continue to feel that the widespread support we're seeing for the Liberals isn't so much a vote for the Liberals as it is a vote against the alternative."

Justason said the drop in support for B.C. Reform may be due to the fact that the federal Reform party has changed its name.

"The B.C. Reform party has lost its national presence," she said.

Vander Zalm said the Liberals are still vulnerable and his party will be running in all 79 ridings.

"Liberal support is a mile long and a mile wide, and half an inch deep," he said, after questioning whether any poll gives a fair picture of real intentions on the ground.

Campbell was almost 30 points ahead in opinion polls in 1995, when he was widely expected to be B.C.'s next premier.

But after Glen Clark took over from then premier Mike Harcourt, Campbell's popularity dropped to the point that it was virtually a dead heat when the election was called.

The NDP won a majority of the seats in 1996, even though the Liberals had a slightly higher percentage of the popular vote, with 41.8 per cent to the NDP's 39.5 per cent.