

Wheezing to a finish

By **CHRISTINA BLIZZARD**

It ain't over 'til the fat lady votes.

That's the message from an SES Research-Sun Media poll.

As Ontarians head to the polls today, pollster Nik Nanos says it's important for voters to keep in mind that all elections go right down to the wire -- and this one is no different. He says 14% of voters make the final decision of who to vote for at the ballot box.

Nanos released a poll this week showing the Liberals are cruising to a majority government, but with New Democrats picking up momentum, some ridings could be tight three-way races.

If the Liberals do pull off back-to-back majorities, it will be the first time in more than 70 years that that party has been able to do so.

The last time was the Mitch Hepburn government in 1934.

Meanwhile, the NDP are picking up votes from disaffected Tories. They don't mind returning the Liberals to power -- but voters may not want to give them that big of a majority. The best kind of government is when there's effective opposition to keep them in check.

The biggest surprise of the campaign is the way Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory's numbers have plummeted. His unpopular platform promise to fund faith-based schools has caused his personal popularity to take a tumble.

"He has had the roughest time during the campaign in regards to his personal image," Nanos said.

"One-third of Ontarians said their perception of him had worsened as a result of his performance during the campaign.

"Dalton McGuinty has worsened, but not as bad as Tory," Nanos said.

And for Tory, a guy running on a "leadership matters" platform, the drop in his personal popularity is catastrophic.

"The fairly hard-hitting, negative campaign that John Tory has run has had an impact on Dalton McGuinty, but John Tory is the first casualty of the faith-based schooling issue," Nanos said.

The only party leader to make gains in his personal popularity over the course of the four-week election campaign is NDP Leader Howard Hampton -- reflecting, perhaps, the fact that he's run a positive campaign that is focused on the issues, Nanos said.

"What might be critical to his success is to reposition the NDP as a protest vote against the Liberals and Conservatives -- which is traditional NDP territory," Nanos said.

"He has conducted himself throughout the campaign in a way where he could legitimately claim that, because he has tried to focus on the issues. He stuck to the issues in the debate. I think he could realistically lay claim to that," he said.

The high percentage of people who decide who to vote for at the last minute means it ain't over until it's over, Nanos said.

"It speaks to the importance of campaigning until the very end -- even on election day," he said.

What the NDP momentum may represent is voter determination not to give one party too big a majority. Sure, voters don't mind giving the Liberals another whirl -- but they're not that happy with them.

That will make for close races in Hamilton, London, Oshawa and northern Ontario.

With three Liberal incumbent MPPs backing out in Hamilton, that city could swing to the left. The bungled Caledonia stand-off makes McGuinty look weak, and it is resonating with electors.

In Oshawa, the NDP's Sid Ryan is challenging Tory incumbent Jerry Ouellette. With the economic uncertainty in the auto sector nagging at the back of voters' minds, that city could be a squeaker.

In London-Fanshawe, incumbent Liberal Khalil Ramal has been weak at Queen's Park. This one is considered winnable by the NDP, where 23-year-old Stephen Maynard is challenging Ramal.

New Democrats have strong momentum across the north. Both Thunder Bay ridings could be in play, although popular Grit incumbent Mike Gravelle should be able to hang on in Superior North, but the Atikokan riding is a three-way race, with Liberal Bill Mauro under a lot of pressure from New Democrat John Rafferty and Tory Rebecca Johnson.

Liberal David Oraziotti could be in tough against New Democrat Jeff Arbus in Sault Ste. Marie, a traditional NDP fief.

And, of course, all eyes will be on Don Valley West tonight. It's not just John Tory who is in the battle for

his political life. If the Tory and Tories can't make a breakthrough in Toronto, the party could be on life support as well.