

## **Grits back off boast, muse about minority**

Polls show Liberals treading water at a level that may or may not bring a majority

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Days after one of his key ministers boldly predicted a Liberal majority government on Oct. 10, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty found himself musing publicly about the prospect of a minority.

During a campaign stop in Barrie yesterday, Mr. McGuinty told reporters he will accept whatever voters choose, including a minority government.

"The electorate will do its own thing in its own course, and that's fine by me," he said.

Asked whether he would be satisfied with a minority government, Mr. McGuinty replied: "I am looking for as much support as I can possibly get."

Just last Friday, Finance Minister Greg Sorbara boasted that the Liberals were headed for a majority government in the provincial election.

Mr. McGuinty was responding to questions about a new poll done for Sun Media by SES Research. It shows the Liberals stalled at 41 per cent of popular support, the Progressive Conservatives at 33 per cent, the NDP at 18 per cent and the Green party at eight per cent.

The survey of 500 voting-age Ontarians was conducted between Friday, a day after last week's televised leaders debate, and Sunday, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The SES poll suggests the debate did little to sway public opinion. Twenty per cent of respondents believe Progressive Conservative leader John Tory won the debate, 15 per cent picked Mr. McGuinty and five per cent gave the nod to the NDP's Howard Hampton. Sixteen per cent said no one won and 44 per cent were uncertain.

Some media reports cited the survey as evidence the Liberals are likely to be reduced to minority status.

That could be a misreading of the findings, however. The eight-point lead the poll gives the Liberals could just as easily mean a majority government is

within reach.

Seat projections done by DemocraticSpace and the Laurier Institute for the Study of Public Opinion and Policy still project a bare Liberal majority. And both those projections are based on five recent polls, which show an average Liberal lead of about five points.

What seems clear is that the Liberals are treading water in the zone between minority and majority government.

That had Mr. Hampton, whose party would likely hold the balance of power in a minority, talking again about what it would take to win his support.

Speaking in Elliot Lake yesterday, he reiterated that the NDP's six core election commitments would form the basis for co-operation if no majority emerges on Oct. 10.

"People are increasingly giving signs that they would be comfortable with a minority government," he said. "If that's the case, then I think Mr. McGuinty needs to start thinking about some of the positive and progressive measures New Democrats are putting forward.

"I think as we go forward over the next couple of weeks there's going to be increased interest on the part of voters in terms of where we are, what we stand for, what's practical, what's doable. I would hope that Mr. McGuinty would start to tune into some of that, too."

Mr. Hampton promised to continue targeting the Liberal record, despite his party's continued third-place standing in polls.

"Part of our campaign is to remind people this is not what you voted for, not what you were promised, and you deserve someone you can count on," he said in Sault Ste. Marie after being asked if Mr. McGuinty was the NDP's own "secret weapon."

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