

## The Duffy trial: Senate scandal testimony stands to threaten Harper's fortunes among soft CPC voters

*Majority of Canadians say scandal runs deeper than Duffy/Wright; most don't believe Harper's version*

**August 20, 2015** – Days of bombshell revelations and conflicting testimony over who in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's inner circle knew what, and when, regarding the Mike Duffy Senate expense affair, are bringing bad news to the fight to lock in "soft" Conservative voters in the midst of a federal election campaign.

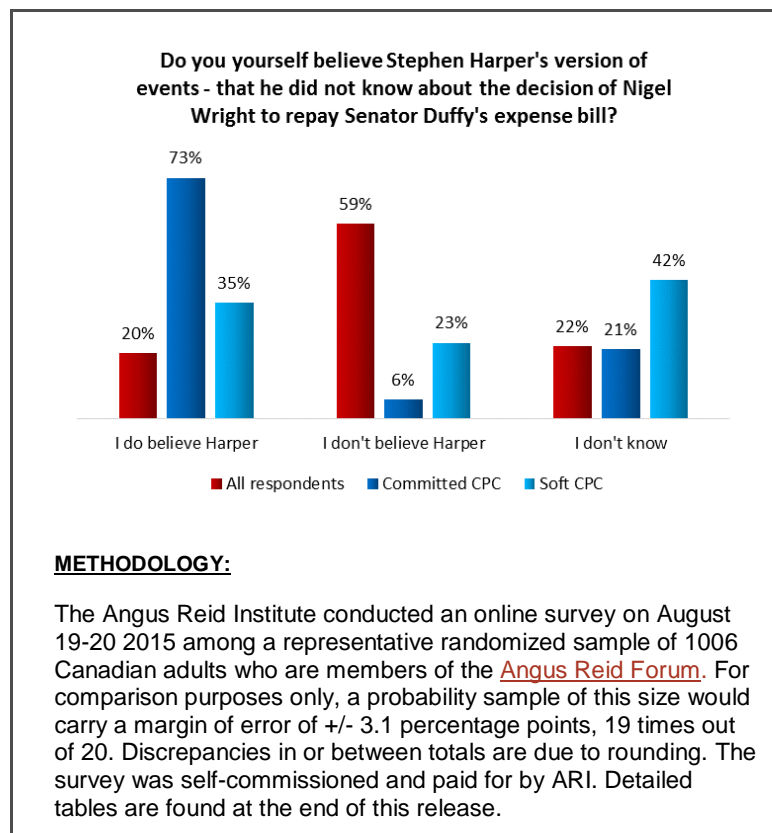
While the election period has yet to reach the halfway point during these dog days of summer, the criminal trial of Senator Mike Duffy – a Harper appointee – is indeed capturing the attention of most Canadians – while exposing skepticism about the PM's version of events. This, according to the findings from the latest Angus Reid Institute public opinion poll.

To recap: Senator Mike Duffy is on trial facing 31 charges of fraud, breach of trust and bribery related to a \$90,000 payment from Harper's former chief of staff, Nigel Wright. This was made to repay Duffy's ineligible Senate housing expenses. Conflicting testimony has subsequently raised

questions over Harper's version of events around this payment: that only Duffy and Wright – excluding all others – were aware of it. Wright has testified that the plan was conceived in part to minimize political damage to the prime minister. Ultimately however, damage has been done – as evidenced by key findings from this poll. Whether that damage is irreversible remains to be seen.

### Key Findings:

- Three-in-five Canadians (59%) say they don't believe Stephen Harper's version of events
- This includes one-in-five (23%) voters leaning towards but not yet totally committed to the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) when it comes to their voting intention on October 19<sup>th</sup>



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- More generally, a majority of all uncommitted voters (59%) reject the Prime Minister's account
- When asked to choose between framing the Duffy trial as a "distraction" from other, more important campaign issues or framing it as evidence of a deeper scandal that will become a key issue in the campaign, fully three-fifths (61%) of all respondents choose the latter
- Among those who see a deeper scandal than what has surfaced already are almost a quarter (23%) of leaning but as yet uncommitted CPC voters
- That said, the Duffy affair may not yet be a deciding issue in the campaign:
  - More than seven-in-ten respondents who don't believe Harper (72%) say the scandal is "outweighed by other election issues"

### **Awareness and Engagement: Are people actually following the media frenzy?**

Since Nigel Wright began his testimony in Duffy's trial earlier this month, the scandal has dominated the news cycle. But are Canadians actually paying attention to the story?

As it turns out, the majority of Canadians (93%) say they are. This total includes:

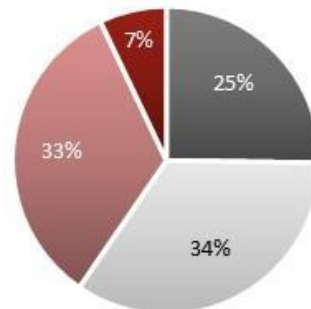
- A quarter (25%) who say they are "following the issue in the news and discussing it with friends and family"
- Another one-third (34%) who are "seeing some media coverage and having the odd conversation about it"
- The rest who say they're "just scanning the headlines"

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## How closely are you following this issue?



- Following it in the news, and discussing it with friends and family
- Seeing some media coverage, and having the odd conversation about it
- Just scanning the headlines
- Haven't seen or heard anything about it

### A question of credibility: Canadians see a deeper scandal, reject Harper's version of events

Harper has maintained that he did not know about Wright's decision to repay Duffy's \$90,000 expense bill. He has said Duffy and Wright are ultimately responsible for the situation, and are being held accountable.

Harper's narrative is accepted by roughly two-in-five Canadians (39%), who agree that the buck stops with Duffy and Wright. They are also of the opinion that the scandal is distracting from other, more important issues during the campaign.

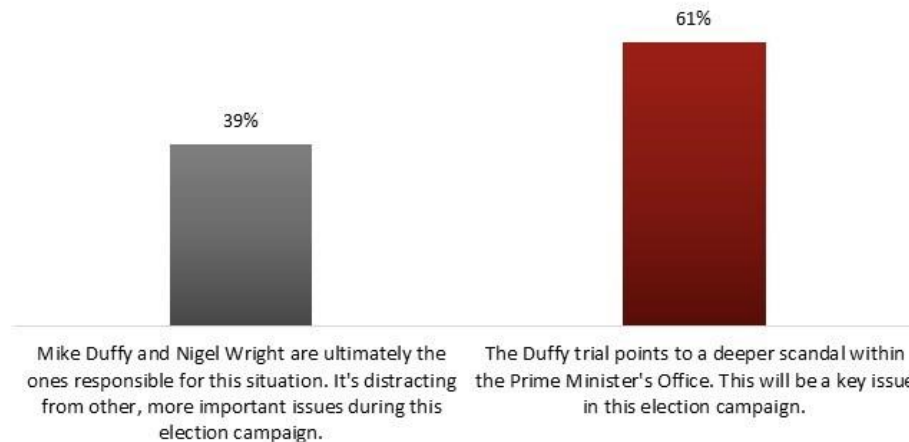
The vast majority (61%), however, disagree. For them, the Duffy trial points to a deeper scandal within the Prime Minister's Office and they see it as an unfolding issue that will be key to how this campaign is decided.

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People have differing opinions on this issue. Which of the following broad statements is closest to your own point of view:



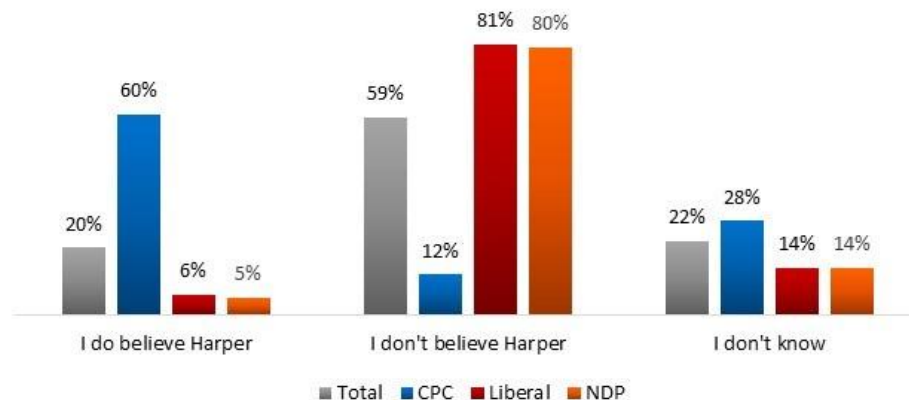
Measurement of this question based on voting intention reveals most committed voters are sticking with their respective camps: overwhelming majorities of locked-in Liberal (80%) and NDP (88%) voters see a deeper scandal lurking. An inverse proportion (90%) of locked-in Conservatives say the issue ends with Duffy and Wright.

But among uncommitted, leaning voters there is less certainty on this question, and this has the potential to create the most vulnerability for the CPC: one-in-five (23%) "soft Conservatives" see a deeper scandal at play, and don't think this story's last pages have been written.

In a separate question, respondents were asked directly whether they believe Harper when he says he didn't know about Wright paying back Duffy's expenses. On this question:

- Three-in-five (59%) say they don't believe him, a margin of three-to-one over those (20%) who say they do
- The remaining one-fifth (22%) are unsure

**Do you yourself believe Stephen Harper's version of events - that he did not know about the decision of his former chief of staff Nigel Wright, to repay Senator Duffy's \$90,000 expense bill?  
(By vote intention - both committed and leaning)**



Those who say they are certain they will vote for the CPC are much more likely than “soft” CPC voters – those who are uncommitted, but leaning Blue – to say they believe Harper:

- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of committed Conservative voters say they believe him
- But just over a third (35%) of soft Conservative supporters say the same

The silver lining for the CPC: soft CPC voters are almost twice as likely to say they don't know if they believe Harper (42%) than say they don't believe his version of events at all (23%).

It should be noted that this “soft” group is a fairly small sample, and thus subject to a larger margin of error than other results reported here. That said, the gap between their reported belief in Harper's narrative and that of committed CPC voters is still notable.

Perhaps predictably, those who are planning on or leaning toward voting for the Liberal or New Democratic parties are significantly less inclined to believe Harper. Four-in-five of each of these groups (81% of Liberals and 80% of NDP voters) say they don't believe him.

### **But does disbelief in Harper spell disaster for him?**

Although most people don't see Harper as believable on the issue of the Duffy trial, they're not necessarily planning to base their votes on that belief.

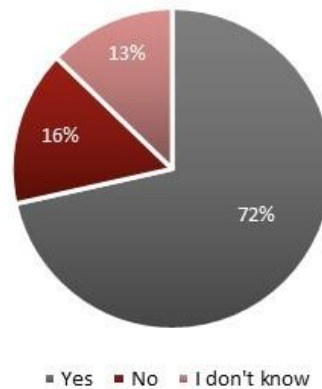
Among those who say they don't believe Harper, almost three-quarters (72%) think other issues will outweigh the Senate scandal when it comes time to cast a ballot on Oct. 19.

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**Even if you don't believe Harper's version of events, do other issues outweigh this scandal when thinking about how you'll vote on October 19th?**



Roughly one-in-six (16%) say the Duffy trial and Senate scandal will not be outweighed by other issues – roughly the same number who said the scandal would be a key election issue when the Angus Reid Institute [asked a similar question in April](#).

Unlike other questions asked in this survey, the question of whether other issues outweigh the scandal isn't heavily correlated with the party one is inclined to support (see detailed tables at the end of this release).

### **Politically, is anybody winning on the Duffy-Senate affair?**

The Angus Reid Institute also asked respondents whether the Senate scandal and the Duffy affair had changed their opinions on the parties and their leaders.

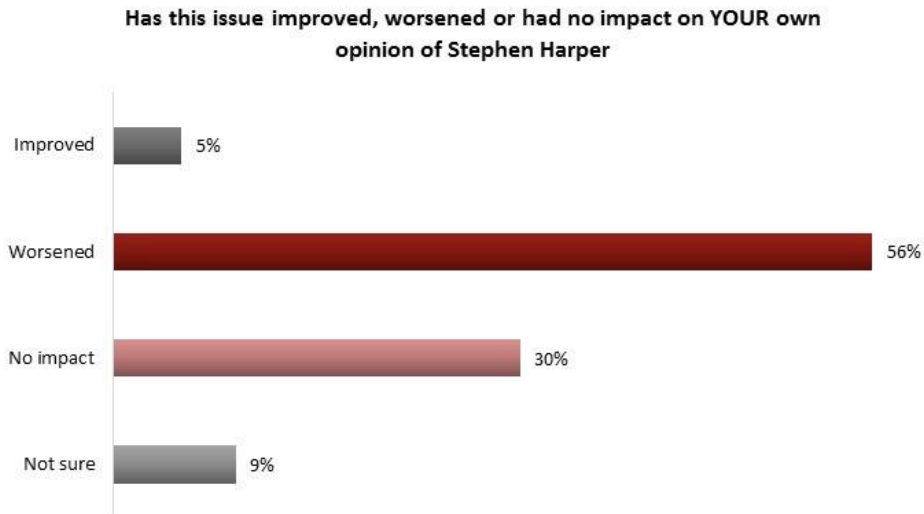
While majorities say the scandal has had no effect on their opinions of Thomas Mulcair and the NDP, Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party, most Canadians overall (56%) say it has worsened their opinion of Harper and the Conservative Party.

Indeed, while the effect of the scandal on the CPC's poll numbers cannot be directly measured, the results of this Angus Reid Institute poll broadly align with those of [a recent Abacus poll](#) that showed the Conservatives six points behind the NDP and just three ahead of the Liberals.

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Among those who say they plan on or are leaning toward casting ballots for the CPC, seven-in-ten (71%) committed Conservative voters say the scandal has had “no impact” on their opinion of Harper and his party. Moreover, a significant segment of locked in CPC supporters (20%) say the scandal has improved their opinion of the PM.

The news is worse for the CPC among their “soft” voters: on this question, uncommitted Conservative leaners are more likely to say their view of Harper has worsened over this issue five-to-one over committed voters (29% versus 6%).

The effect of the Duffy affair on “soft voters” – those who have either not made up their minds on who to vote for or say they could change their minds before election day – is particularly relevant, as it could provide a lens on what effect, if any, the scandal is likely to have on the election.

### What to do with the Red Chamber, ultimately?

The Duffy trial is taking place amid widespread uncertainty and debate about the future of the Senate. In July, Harper [announced a moratorium](#) on new Senate appointments, with the explicit intention of putting pressure on the provinces to commit to reforming or abolishing the scandal-plagued institution.

While time will tell whether the moratorium will have any effect on perceptions of Harper’s role in the scandal, advocating for some sort of change to the Senate should be a popular position to take.

When the Angus Reid Institute [asked Canadians about this issue](#) in April, respondents were unequivocal: the status quo is not an option.

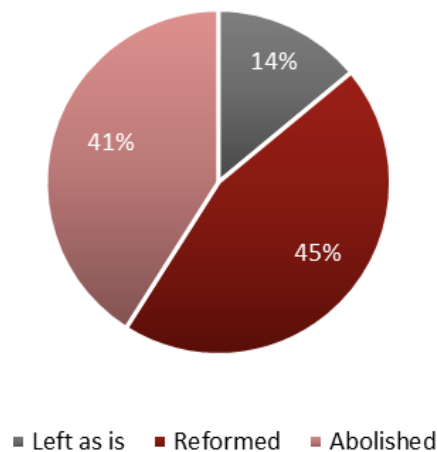
Opinion was split between outright abolishing the Red Chamber (41%) and reforming it (45%). One-in-seven (14%) said the Senate should be left as is.

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## Should the Senate be: (April ARI Survey)



Indeed, Senate reform has been attempted, and has failed at various times in the history of the 105-seat chamber – most recently – [last year](#). At that time, the federal government proposed non-binding elections to select senators, term limits of nine years, and a mechanism to abolish the Senate altogether. In a unanimous decision last April, however, the [Supreme Court of Canada ruled](#) the Harper government required substantial provincial consent to introduce such changes.

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*



How closely are you following this issue?							
(unweighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (112)	SK/MB (74)	ON (370)	QC (240)	ATL (65)
Following it in the news, and discussing it with friends and	25%	28%	21%	26%	25%	25%	28%
Seeing some media coverage, and having the odd conversation	34%	36%	31%	40%	40%	25%	34%
Just scanning the headlines	33%	30%	37%	30%	31%	38%	28%
Haven't seen or heard anything about it	7%	5%	11%	5%	4%	12%	10%

Which of the following broad statements is closest to your own point of view?							
(unweighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (112)	SK/MB (74)	ON (370)	QC (240)	ATL (65)
Mike Duffy and Nigel Wright are ultimately the ones responsible for this situation. It's distracting from other, more important issues during this election campaign.	39%	36%	45%	49%	43%	32%	31%
The Duffy trial points to a deeper scandal within the Prime Minister's Office. This will be a key issue in this election campaign.	61%	64%	55%	51%	57%	68%	69%

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Which of the following broad statements is closest to your own point of view?							
(weighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Federal Vote Next					
		Certain CPC Voters (158)	Soft CPC Voters (83)	Certain Liberal Voters (111)	Soft Liberal Voters (118)	Certain NDP Voters (170)	Soft NDP Voters (165)
Mike Duffy and Nigel Wright are ultimately the ones responsible for this situation. It's distracting from other, more important issues during this election campaign.	39%	90%	77%	20%	27%	12%	29%
The Duffy trial points to a deeper scandal within the Prime Minister's Office. This will be a key issue in this election campaign.	61%	10%	23%	80%	73%	88%	71%

Do you yourself believe Stephen Harper's version of events - that he did not know about the decision of his former chief of staff Nigel Wright, to repay Senator Duffy's \$90,000 expense bill?							
(unweighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (112)	SK/MB (74)	ON (370)	QC (240)	ATL (65)
I do believe Harper	20%	19%	23%	32%	24%	11%	10%
I don't believe Harper	59%	59%	52%	57%	54%	67%	69%
I don't know	22%	22%	25%	11%	22%	22%	21%

Do you yourself believe Stephen Harper's version of events - that he did not know about the decision of his former chief of staff Nigel Wright, to repay Senator Duffy's \$90,000 expense bill?							
(weighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Federal Vote Next					
		Certain CPC Voters (158)	Soft CPC Voters (83)	Certain Liberal Voters (111)	Soft Liberal Voters (118)	Certain NDP Voters (170)	Soft NDP Voters (165)
I do believe Harper	20%	73%	35%	5%	6%	3%	8%
I don't believe Harper	59%	6%	23%	88%	74%	86%	75%
I don't know	22%	21%	42%	7%	20%	12%	17%

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**Even if you don't believe Harper's version of events, do other issues outweigh this scandal when thinking about how you'll vote on October 19th?**

	Don't believe Harper (593)	Federal Vote Next		
		CPC* (28)	Liberal Party (186)	NDP (269)
Yes	72%	56%	74%	75%
No	16%	17%	18%	15%
I don't know	13%	26%	8%	10%

\*Small sample size

**Has this issue improved, worsened or had no impact on YOUR own opinion of each of the following:  
[Conservative Party and Stephen Harper]**

(unweighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (112)	SK/MB (74)	ON (370)	QC (240)	ATL (65)
Improved	5%	5%	8%	8%	5%	4%	2%
Worsened	56%	65%	40%	53%	52%	60%	64%
No impact	30%	24%	41%	30%	34%	26%	22%
Not sure	9%	6%	11%	9%	8%	10%	12%

**Has this issue improved, worsened or had no impact on YOUR own opinion of each of the following:  
[Conservative Party and Stephen Harper]**

(weighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Federal Vote Next					
		Certain CPC Voters (158)	Soft CPC Voters (83)	Certain Liberal Voters (111)	Soft Liberal Voters (118)	Certain NDP Voters (170)	Soft NDP Voters (165)
Improved	5%	20%	9%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Worsened	56%	6%	29%	81%	74%	80%	67%
No impact	30%	71%	57%	13%	19%	19%	24%
Not sure	9%	2%	5%	4%	6%	1%	8%

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**Has this issue improved, worsened or had no impact on YOUR own opinion of each of the following:  
[Liberal Party and Justin Trudeau]**

(unweighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (112)	SK/MB (74)	ON (370)	QC (240)	ATL (65)
Improved	16%	16%	14%	11%	17%	15%	22%
Worsened	13%	15%	15%	12%	15%	9%	7%
No impact	61%	58%	58%	63%	59%	65%	61%
Not sure	11%	10%	14%	14%	9%	11%	10%

**Has this issue improved, worsened or had no impact on YOUR own opinion of each of the following:  
[Liberal Party and Justin Trudeau]**

(weighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Federal Vote Next					
		Certain CPC Voters (158)	Soft CPC Voters (83)	Certain Liberal Voters (111)	Soft Liberal Voters (118)	Certain NDP Voters (170)	Soft NDP Voters (165)
Improved	16%	1%	9%	49%	29%	12%	16%
Worsened	13%	40%	23%	1%	2%	9%	6%
No impact	61%	53%	61%	47%	61%	75%	69%
Not sure	11%	7%	6%	3%	8%	4%	9%

**Has this issue improved, worsened or had no impact on YOUR own opinion of each of the following:  
[New Democratic Party and Thomas Mulcair]**

(unweighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Region					
		BC (145)	AB (112)	SK/MB (74)	ON (370)	QC (240)	ATL (65)
Improved	21%	23%	11%	16%	18%	29%	26%
Worsened	11%	13%	16%	13%	12%	8%	4%
No impact	58%	52%	62%	59%	60%	56%	61%
Not sure	10%	11%	11%	13%	10%	8%	9%

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Has this issue improved, worsened or had no impact on YOUR own opinion of each of the following: [New Democratic Party and Thomas Mulcair]							
(weighted sample size)	Total (1006)	Federal Vote Next					
		Certain CPC Voters (158)	Soft CPC Voters (83)	Certain Liberal Voters (111)	Soft Liberal Voters (118)	Certain NDP Voters (170)	Soft NDP Voters (165)
Improved	21%	3%	5%	24%	18%	47%	29%
Worsened	11%	37%	19%	5%	8%	1%	2%
No impact	58%	53%	74%	69%	65%	52%	60%
Not sure	10%	6%	2%	3%	8%	1%	9%

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