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Things fall apart; the centre can't hold

Liberals sliding in Ontario, Quebec

[CHANTAL HÉBERT](#)

With only two weeks to go in the federal election campaign, the Liberals are in disarray right across the crucial battleground of central Canada.

As the latest Toronto Star-EKOS poll shows, Liberal efforts to generate traction at the expense of the Conservative party have so far only succeeded in pushing the party further down the slippery slope of an election disaster.

At the end of a week when Liberal attacks on the Conservative agenda have held centre stage in the campaign, more voters say they would feel comfortable with a Conservative majority government than with a Liberal one.

They may yet get their wish.

In Quebec, the Liberal machine is running on empty, exhausted by a string of counterproductive attempts to level the playing field with the Bloc Québécois.

Instead, the sovereigntist party's lead is growing.

At mid-campaign, the Bloc is on the way to the best election performance in its history.

Liberal morale in Quebec is at an all-time low.

There have even been calls for help to Sheila Copps and Jean Chrétien, the two Liberal figures who are the least identified with [Paul Martin](#).

In Ontario, a search for heated local battles these days often turns up Liberals who are already tallying up their dead.

A sweep through a dozen GTA ridings this week revealed low Liberal morale, bewilderment at a national campaign that seems designed to turn Martin into the leader of the opposition and a growing sense that defeat is inevitable.

Except for a lucky few, Liberal candidates now tend to fall in two general categories — those who feel they are in the fight of their lives and those who have quietly given up.

In Ontario, the former often tend to be engaged in battles against the NDP while the latter have been at a loss to counter the Conservative surge that has so obviously caught the Martin brain trust off guard.

Everywhere, Liberals lament the timing of the election, the lack of consistent direction of the national campaign and Martin's relative aloofness from the battlefield.

While the other party leaders have been crisscrossing the country, often spending days on buses to get to as many

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ridings as possible, Martin has largely been confined to the large urban markets of the country.

Again today, he will be making only two speeches, both in front of non-partisan audiences in Montreal and Toronto while his candidates fend for themselves on the hustings.

In Martin's physical absence, an every-man-for-himself atmosphere is taking hold on the ground with local Liberal incumbents hoping against hope that whatever personal assets they may have will save the day.

It was not supposed to be this way.

The main (weak) assumption of the Liberal campaign was that Martin was going to be the top drawing card of the party in its bid for an unlikely fourth majority mandate.

But these days, candidates report that they hear little one way or another about the Liberal leader at the doorstep.

The increasing indifference to Martin's message is more than compensated by Liberal talk about their leader's after-election prospects.

When they tally up the prospective political casualties of what has so far been the most disastrous Liberal campaign in two decades, Martin's name sits at the top of the list.

If the trend is not reversed, he stands to become the shortest-lived federal Liberal leader in modern Canadian history.

But perhaps the most striking feature of the local Liberal campaign is that hope has become such a rare commodity.

One would have been hard pressed this week to find a Liberal who expects much from Martin's performance at the two televised leaders' debates next week.

Instead, many fear that the pivotal debates could accelerate what a senior Liberal strategist described as a downward spiral on a conference call with Ontario candidates on Wednesday.

That has certainly been the history of parties who have tried to snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat with negative advertising in the recent past.

The Kim Campbell Tories' decision to train their guns on Chrétien in 1993 ended up being the kiss of death of their beleaguered campaign.

In 1997, the Reform party forewent its last chance for an Ontario breakthrough when Preston Manning authorized ads urging voters to turn their backs on federal leaders from Quebec.

The Liberals who were on the winning end of the equation on both of those occasions have reason to know that, as a rule, parties who go for broke end up broke.

While conventional wisdom dictates that the 17 days left in the campaign offer the Liberals an opportunity to catch up to their Tory rivals, they also amount to a chance for Harper to build on his growing lead on the Liberals.

When the campaign started, a neck-and-neck finish with the Liberals was the Conservative party's best-case scenario.

But now, Harper could be only one good debate performance away from entering majority government territory, a zone so many believed to be exclusively Liberal when the campaign got under way a few short weeks ago.

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