

Party can rebound in the polls, Martin says

Stand on social values is key, PM maintains

Tuition help for post-secondary students pledged

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Prime Minister Paul Martin says his party's stand on social values will help the Liberals rebound from their current slide in the opinion polls.

"It's a very close race, it has been right from the beginning. I certainly don't believe that we're falling behind," the Liberal leader said yesterday on a radio show in Hamilton before heading to the GTA.

Martin stated that "people said the same thing" when the Liberals trailed the Conservatives at mid-campaign in 2004, but his party managed to win a minority mandate on voting day.

With just over two weeks left before voting day on Jan. 23, Martin is struggling to get out his re-election message through a blizzard of distractions created by the RCMP's income trust investigation and Liberal gaffes.

It is assumed in the Martin camp that last week's revelation that the Mounties were probing the Liberal government's handling of the income trust tax decision was a major factor in the latest poll findings by EKOS Research Associates.

The EKOS survey, published in the *Star* yesterday, showed the Conservatives have shot ahead in voter popularity nationally, with 36.2 per cent support, compared to 30.4 per cent for the Liberals. The NDP had 17.9 per cent support.

But the Liberals are focusing on trying to turn around their fortunes.

"You know what they say, a week in politics is like a lifetime — a lot can happen in 18 days," said Human Resources Minister Belinda Stronach, who attended a Liberal event yesterday morning in Waterloo. "I'm focusing on the good things that we're putting forward. We want to get that message out.

"We're looking at two different visions of Canada," Stronach said, referring to the Conservatives' policies.

At a news conference at the University of Waterloo, Martin spelled out how a Liberal government would, over the next five years, spend \$8 billion — most of it already set aside in earlier budgets — to assist post-secondary students, Canadians needing skills training and those receiving social assistance who are seeking work.

Beginning in 2007, Ottawa would pay half of the annual tuition for an undergraduate student — up to \$3,000 a year — in the first and graduating years in which that student attends a Canadian university or college. Families who take advantage of this funding would not be eligible for the federal tuition tax credit, federal officials said.

"Education and skills training unlock potential," Martin said. "They create choice for Canadians."

But the Liberals' education-and-training pledges were partly obscured by controversies that have seemed to dog Martin.

He had to skate around the issue of compensation for Chinese Canadians seeking redress for the so-called head tax charged to each immigrant from China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Earlier this week, in an interview on a Chinese-language broadcast in Victoria, Martin for the first time apologized for the head tax.

He was asked yesterday if this did not open the government up to demands for financial compensation for Canadians of Chinese descent who paid the head tax, as well as for their families.

While saying he regrets what happened to the Chinese immigrants, he added: "We have said that there is no question of compensation" from the government. That goes for Italians or Ukrainians also seeking financial redress for past wrongs, he said.

Martin was also forced to make excuses for one of his star candidates, Marc Garneau. The former astronaut likened Quebec separatism to the invasion of Iraq by the American military.

"Marc Garneau is a proud Quebecer" who "has had enormous successes" and would be a useful addition to Parliament. "This said, maybe it was not the best example to take, to choose," Martin said. But he said Garneau was only expressing the "uncertainty, the worry that many Quebecers" feel about the upsurge of sovereignist forces in Quebec.

The Liberals hope that they persuade Canadians that the choice on Jan. 23 will be between Martin's commitment to generous social programs and what he calls the Tories' "fend-for-yourself" approach based on tax cuts and a diminished role for the federal government.

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