

Martin slams Tory promises

PM says Canada can't afford Harper's fiscal platform Liberal leader uses economy to rebuild faltering campaign

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OTTAWA—Canada can't afford the huge deficits a Conservative government would inflict on the country, say Prime Minister Paul Martin and his Liberals, fiercely scrambling to seize back momentum in the election campaign that enters its final, intense phase with TV debates tonight and tomorrow night.

In the face of what seems to be an unstoppable surge in Tory strength in the polls, the Liberals have rushed to the ramparts of the economy and Martin's long-held reputation as a deficit-fighter in a bid to stay in the race. But Conservatives say that Liberals are no longer credible even on this score.

Yesterday, the Liberals released their own cost accounting of Conservative Leader Stephen Harper's promises, which they say would put Canada in the red to the tune of \$12.4 billion after five years.

"I know these numbers," Martin said yesterday of his rival's tax-cut and spending plans. "And I know that we've got a very strong economy because we've stayed out of deficit. And I'll be very, very interested in how his numbers add up.

"I can tell you that a government which would willingly go back into deficit is a government willing to sacrifice the tremendous growth that we have seen in our economy."

EKOS Research Associates, polling for the *Star* and *La Presse* in results to be issued tomorrow, found over the weekend that the Conservatives still continue to climb ahead in all parts of the country, including Quebec.

With credibility and trust the central issues going into tonight's debate, Liberals and Tories are skirmishing on the all-important field of fiscal integrity. Liberal insiders say that it was on Friday night, during a flight from Trenton, Ont., to Montreal, that the Martin team decided to pull out of their gloom and wage an all-out battle to keep power out of Conservative hands.

Conservatives immediately mocked Martin's claims to "know these numbers," charging that Liberal governments have consistently been way off in surplus projections over the years. They also pointed to their own independent analysis, from the Conference Board of Canada, which they say refutes the Liberals' big-deficit claims.

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"We found that the Conservative Party's economic platform is affordable in each fiscal year from 2005-2006 through 2010-2011. In each year there is enough fiscal room to pay down at least \$3 billion a year in debt, as in the (government's) fiscal plan," wrote Paul Darby, deputy chief economist of the Conference Board.

The board, given access to the Conservative platform, including parts that haven't yet been released, found there was a "substantial surplus," Tories claim.

"Over the five-year forecast horizon to 2010-2011, the (Conference Board's) economic and fiscal outlook suggests that there remains \$15.7 billion in unallocated fiscal room, over and above the annual debt payment, which provides further cushion to ensure that deficits do not occur due to adverse economic effects."

This flurry of economic claim and counter-claim is the opening act for the TV debates tonight and tomorrow night, which kick off the final two weeks and what is shaping up to be a desperate fight to the finish between the faltering Liberals and the surging Conservatives.

For Martin and Harper especially, this second set of debates, to be broadcast from Montreal, could prove crucial to the outcome of the vote on Jan. 23, just two weeks from today.

Harper needs to retain the momentum he has built to date — which has put him within striking distance of minority government in most polls — while Martin needs to kick off some kind of campaign recovery.

NDP Leader Jack Layton, meanwhile, needs to use this broad exposure to drive home his oft-repeated message that this election is more than a two-way race and his party wants to be a broker in whatever minority is the result of the vote.

Frank Graves, head of EKOS, said last night that his firm's polls show the trends are all in the Tories' favour going into tonight's debates. Nightly polling is showing "continued strong growth to the Conservatives largely at the expense of a fading Liberal campaign," he said.

Graves says the Quebec surge could translate into bigger gains beyond that province for the Tories.

For tonight's debate, organizers have sorted through more than 9,000 suggested questions submitted by voters over the past six weeks. Unlike the previous set of debates in December, however, the questions will not be posed by the citizens themselves, but by a moderator.

Moderator for tonight's English-language debate is Steve Paikin of TVO. Tomorrow's French-language moderator is Sophie Thibault, news anchor on the TVA network in Quebec. The two-hour shows will be broadcast from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

On CTV's *Question Period* program yesterday, Paikin said the final questions for tonight were still being developed.

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