

Jun. 12, 2004. 01:00 AM

Punishing the Liberals, and damn the consequences

No compelling reason offered for Liberal re-election

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Hope is a gaseous and unpredictable political element. It expands suddenly only to contract precipitously at the most inopportune moment.

Measured by today's EKOS Research poll commissioned by the Star and La Presse, [Paul Martin](#) is a model victim of its serendipitous swings. Once puffed up by hope and bloated on impossible expectations, the Liberal leader is now visibly deflating through a thousand pinpricks of disappointment.

Led by what the survey identifies as cohorts of older, wealthier, more pessimistic and less tolerant male voters, Canadians are turning away from Martin and the Liberals in such significant numbers that [Stephen Harper](#) could conceivably form a majority Conservative government. To put that in perspective, a year ago the Conservatives were two parties, trailed by some 40 percentage points in critical Ontario and were braced for a historic Martin triumph that would include West as well as East.

Barring some national epiphany on the suddenly short road to June 28, that won't happen. Liberals would now consider themselves fortunate indeed to salvage a minority government from the wreckage of five rudderless months of Martin rule and a campaign still careening from guardrail to guardrail.

Worse still, this could be as good as it gets for these Liberals.

Next week, a Prime Minister with his confidence already badly shaken enters back-to-back French and English debates under the kind of pressure that turns flaws into fissures. Rather than a bravura performance, odds tilt toward Harper surprising a country that doesn't yet know him with a persona far less scary than one Liberals tried so hard to create.

At the same time, Canadians will be passing judgment on startlingly negative Liberal ads that speak as much to the ruling party's desperation as to their fervent wish that Canadians will see the dark implications of voting for Reformers repackaged as caring Conservatives.

Unfortunately for Liberals, another dynamic is shaping this election. In the absence of any compelling reason to reward a party now in power for more than a decade, voters are relishing the opportunity to lay heavy wood to Liberals. That, more than any great enthusiasm for Harper and the Conservatives, is threatening to turn an expected victory into a potential rout.

"What we are seeing so far is censure over sense," says EKOS president Frank Graves. "And there is no significant sign that trend is about to be reversed."

His point is that voters are so indifferent to Martin and so damned mad at Liberals that they are willing to suspend concerns about the consequences of electing Conservatives. Driven by anger at scandal and waste, sustained by the Martin administration's failure to deliver on promises made too easily and too often, that eagerness to punish Liberals has taken the ruling party, first, from majority to minority and, now, to the threshold of opposition.

Turning that around will be difficult, perhaps impossible. With less than two weeks remaining after the debates, Liberals are short of the time, energy and organization needed to re-inflate Martin and themselves.

That would require tapping into residual public confidence that Martin, arguably the most respected finance minister in Canadian history, could somehow still morph into an equally larger-than-life prime minister.

Back when nothing seemed beyond Martin, that confidence led Canadians to conclude that he could be all things to all people: a political superhero who would mend rips in the social safety net, build a buffed-up, new-age economy, reduce the democratic deficit and restore Canada's prestigious place in the world while reducing taxes.

No one, not even scarlet Liberals, still dream those impossible dreams. But they do find some comfort in polls finding that the thought of Conservatives in power is adding new perspective.

Despite the convergence of all parties somewhere near the political centre, Martin and Harper, the only leaders with any real chance of forming a government, are seen as offering significantly different visions of the country's future. As the EKOS poll charts, those differences are best defined by this campaign's hottest topics — same-sex marriage and abortion — as well on some cooler issues, including the Kyoto environmental accord and Canada's ability to protect a unique identity on a continent the United States dominates.

Liberals going nowhere on their own merits are finding a little traction in fears about their rivals

Liberals foolishly built their campaign around the expectation that concern about protecting health care would focus attention on social issues and, for the second time, insulate a vulnerable ruling party from a right-wing challenger. Instead, Harper cleverly moved his party close enough to the Liberals to become indistinguishable on medicare, leaving them searching for a wedge issue that would split the electorate in their favour.

That search has not been entirely in vain. Rescued by the injudicious comments of holdover Alliance members hopelessly out of sync with public opinion on abortion and gay rights, Liberals going nowhere on their own merits are finding a little traction in fears about their rivals.

About 40 per cent of Canadians worry that punishing Liberals by electing Conservatives will send the country in the wrong direction. That's high enough to make Liberals believe they can still swing critical votes back to the ruling party.

Those doubts surface with the biggest splash among Green party voters, but they also ripple strongly through the NDP.

With enough encouragement, that could spark what Graves calls a "hold your nose" retreat to the Liberals by Green and NDP supporters too uncomfortable with Conservatives to risk voting their conscience.

Strategic voting is a spectre that always appears in close elections. For Liberals, it is now perilously close to a last straw.

Their stark reality is that support is dangerously soft. Rather than provide time for a miraculous recovery, the final weeks of this campaign could spawn another kind of strategic voting, the kind where individuals, provinces and regions decide to climb on a bandwagon rather than be left behind and out of a new government's largesse.

It falls to Martin to hastily insert some backbone into that support by reminding voters of the costs and consequences of turning the federal government over to a party that not long ago was seen as anathema east of Manitoba. To succeed, he must convince Canadians to look harder at Conservative promises that Liberals insist are too good to be true.

Even after seven years of surpluses and an economy that sets the pace among G-8 nations, this country isn't able to slash taxes and improve social services. It can't stretch the budget in enough directions to simultaneously spend on health and the military, big cities and small towns, agriculture and law and order.

To believe all that is possible without sliding back into deficit is to pile on Harper all the unreasonable expectations that so recently fell from Martin.

The black humour isn't lost on Liberals. They figure that a year from now a cynical electorate will be stumbling to the same conclusion about the Conservative leader that it reached so recently about the Prime Minister.

Intriguingly, those around the Prime Minister now see the benefit of thinking small. Instead of claiming Martin is the Mr. Fix-it of politics, the guy who can do everything, they are hurriedly repositioning the leader as someone who can be trusted to do one thing right.

That one thing is to reduce health-care waiting lists. By personally guaranteeing results, as he did in his Toronto speech yesterday, Martin is playing directly to the once strongly held perception that he is a politician who will do what he says and, most of all, will accept responsibility.

Political scientists will see that as a tacit admission that Conservatives won the battle to frame this election around Liberal accountability. But the ruling party no longer enjoys the luxury of denying its enemy such small victories.

With time and support slipping away, it must again harness the political force that carried Martin so effortlessly to the leadership. While the television ads spread fear and loathing about the kind of country Conservatives would create and then leave for younger, more optimistic and tolerant Canadians, Martin will be trying to reconnect to hope.

Toying with such an unstable element is tricky business, particularly when voters are angry and unsettled. But so late in a failing venture, Liberals have nothing left to lose.

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