

## Signs point to a Tory victory

### Lead in national poll continues Key Liberals admit defeat possible

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From a new *Toronto Star* poll to candid public admissions of looming Liberal defeat from a top party strategist and a cabinet minister, all signs point to a Conservative government with one week to go until election day.

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper is so confident that yesterday he was appealing to voters in Buckingham, Que., to elect some Quebec Tory MPs so they can sit "in my cabinet."

Against the backdrop of losing power, Liberal Leader Paul Martin, meanwhile, was in Laval, Que., pledging an additional \$6.3 billion over five years for cities to build bridges, roads, transit and sports facilities, and other urban infrastructure.

But the latest EKOS Research Associates survey conducted for the *Star* and *La Presse* suggests Martin's remaining time in office numbers in the days rather than years.

EKOS president Frank Graves said the only question is whether Harper can win the 155 seats of the 308-seat Commons to form a majority government.

"Clearly, he's going to achieve a government of some sort," Graves said last night.

Nationally, Harper's Conservatives enjoy the support of 38.6 per cent of decided voters compared to 27.2 per cent for Martin's Liberals, 18.6 per cent for Jack Layton's NDP, 10.6 per cent for Gilles Duceppe's Bloc Québécois, and 4.4 per cent for the Green party led by Jim Harris.

EKOS surveyed 1,184 Canadians aged 18 and older Saturday and yesterday with 968 saying they were decided voters.

The poll is considered accurate to within 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

In Ontario, home to 106 seats, the firm interviewed 514 people and found the Tories are at 41.7 per cent, the Liberals at 31.4 per cent, the NDP at 20.3 per cent and the Greens at 5.7 per cent. Those numbers are accurate to within 4.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

In Quebec, with 75 seats up for grabs, the separatist Bloc is at 46.6 per cent, the Tories at 21.6 per cent, the Liberals at 18.1 per cent, the NDP at 9.8 per cent, and the Greens at 3.3 per cent. EKOS polled 286 Quebecers and the data there is accurate to within 5.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

#### The Pundits

From now until election day, get behind the headlines as three party insiders trade views in our daily forum. Moderator David Olive sets out the issues for Conservative Tim Powers, Liberal Sheila Gervais and NDP insider Jamey Heath. [Join the fray.](#)

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Graves said with 15 per cent of voters nationwide still undecided — "a very significant rise" more than double earlier surveys — much could happen between now and Jan. 23.

"We're seeing, for example, that there are as many Liberals who are willing to move to the NDP as vice versa and it's always been the other way around (with voters strategically deserting the New Democrats to go to the Liberals to stop the Tories)," he said.

"But all the trends clearly point to a Conservative government."

High-ranking Liberals were publicly admitting as much yesterday.

Human Resources Minister Belinda Stronach and senior Liberal campaign strategist Mike Robinson acknowledged the Liberals' potential defeat on CTV's *Question Period*.

"I don't think any of us are going to disagree that if you look at the polls, there's no question that if the election were held today, the Conservative party would form a government," said Robinson, a long-time Martin organizer and senior partner at the Earncliffe consulting firm.

"I don't deny that, and I think the challenge in the next week is to make sure that Canadians, as they're facing that decision, they're facing that choice, understand the ramifications of that decision," he said.

Stronach, in fact, said Canadians should consider whether they want a cabinet made up of people such as former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day and former taxpayers' advocate, MP Jason Kenney — who were among her caucus colleagues until eight months ago, when she crossed the floor to become a Liberal minister.

"It's time that the people of Ontario, and Canadians, visit the consequences of a change in government," said Stronach, one of the backroom operatives who convinced Harper to merge the Alliance with the Progressive Conservatives in 2003.

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**'The question is not simply change — the question is: Change for what?'**

***Paul Martin, Prime Minister***

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"I get a bit of the feeling that Canadians are taking our prosperity for granted and our society for granted," she said, deriding Harper, who finished ahead of her in the 2004 Tory leadership race, as "an inexperienced and unproven leader."

Trailing in every major poll, Martin plans to spend the final frantic days of the campaign appealing to Canadians to think twice about what will happen if they make Harper the first Tory prime minister since Kim Campbell in 1993.

His theme for the final week, as stated yesterday: "The question is not simply change — the question is: Change for what?"

But in the wider political landscape away from the day-to-day campaigning, some Liberals have already begun to think past next Monday.

"It will give the party a chance to take a walk in the desert and figure out where it wants to go from here," said one Liberal close to former prime minister Jean Chrétien.

Another staunch Liberal expressed great anticipation over the likely demise of the Martin government, which he said was marked by incompetence and lack of purpose. "He'll be out of here on the night of Jan. 23," the Liberal predicted.

In the final week, Martin plans an all-out cross-country blitz during which he will sharpen the language he is using against Harper, senior Liberals said, admitting it will be difficult to slow Harper's momentum and revive a campaign marred by gaffes and unexpected developments.

"It's been a tough campaign," one Liberal organizer lamented yesterday. Liberals say they have been hurt by Harper's effective shift to the middle of the political spectrum and the woes that have undercut Martin's attempt to get out his message.

In particular, his attempt to announce major policies on education, seniors and other issues just after New Year's was thrown off course by the fall-out from the RCMP investigation of the Liberal government's income trust tax decision.

The Liberal campaign, with its sometimes sparse audiences packed into small meeting rooms, has taken on a bit of a desperate air in the final stage of the election campaign.

"I won by 72 votes the last time," Heritage Minister Liza Frulla told reporters at an event in Montreal. "It was very difficult and it's still very, very hard here on the ground."

Still, at a rally later yesterday afternoon in North Bay, Martin was visibly buoyed as he spoke to a cheering crowd of 700 Liberals.

As Martin was on a frenzied swing from Laval to Montreal to North Bay to a rally in Edmonton last night, a confident Harper enjoyed a relaxing day, making one appearance in Buckingham, just across the Quebec border from Ottawa.

"Quebec's place is not in the stands, Quebec's place is on the ice," he told a cheering partisan audience of 200 supporters gathered in a Knights of Columbus hall.

Campaigning in Pontiac, one of three ridings believed to be within Tory grasp, Harper again set his sights on the Bloc, insisting that voters who wish to protest Liberal ethics should turn their backs on a party forever consigned to opposition.

He also played up his promise to resolve the fiscal imbalance between Ottawa and the provinces, a pledge to allow Quebec a larger role internationally, and effectively promised voters in Pontiac that if Tory candidate Lawrence Cannon is elected he will be assured a seat in cabinet.

"Quebec needs Lawrence Cannon in a new government, I need Lawrence in my cabinet," he said.

Last night the Tories flew to New Brunswick for the second time in four days, and tomorrow will return to Quebec City, another area where the party has hopes for a win.

Rising poll numbers have led Tory strategists to think that a major breakthrough is in the offing in Atlantic Canada. They now speak openly about winning five ridings in New Brunswick and perhaps gaining a toehold in Prince Edward Island.

Harper will head to Charlottetown today to drum up party support there. Party officials are also planning a large rally in Montreal this week.

The Tory campaign has also generated interest outside Canada. Tour officials added a third media bus yesterday to accommodate journalists who have joined for the last week. Correspondents from the BBC, France 2, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Time* magazine have made inquiries about

Harper and are expected to generate pieces on the Tory surge.

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