

Liberals scramble to curb losses

Martin appeals to NDP voters to form 'coalition'

New tracking poll suggests race may be tightening

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OTTAWA BUREAU

Prime Minister Paul Martin is asking New Democrat voters to form a "coalition" at the ballot box next week to avert a Conservative government and save Canada's social programs.

"There's got to be a coalition of progressive voters," Martin said in an interview with CBC TV yesterday.

"I think that that is the position that an awful lot of people who support the NDP are going to find themselves in. If they vote NDP, then obviously that's not a progressive vote that's going to win out, and the option to that is Stephen Harper, and I think a lot of people are going to take that into account."

With the election now less than a week away and their fortunes in a slide, Liberals are in last-ditch territory, imploring voters to seriously consider the shape of a future Tory government. They are painting it as cold and axe-wielding, a reverse Robin Hood that would take from the poor to favour the rich.

A new poll for the *Star* and *La Presse* by EKOS Research Associates shows that voters could be listening. According to EKOS, a survey of 694 people yesterday indicates the Liberals and Conservatives have drawn closer to each other, with the Conservatives at 35.8 per cent support, the Liberals at 29.6, the NDP at 19.4, the Bloc Québécois at 11.6 per cent and the Green party at 3.4. The margin of error for a sample of this size is 3.7 percentage points.

"Just mark my words," Industry Minister David Emerson told reporters travelling with Martin yesterday in Vancouver. "If they get elected, they are going to begin a massive review of programs and a massive set of cuts to government programs.



PAUL CHIASSON/CP

Prime Minister Paul Martin pauses during a news conference while campaigning in Vancouver yesterday where he spoke about the attack on a Canadian convoy in Afghanistan that killed a Canadian diplomat and wounded three soldiers.

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"And people are going to say, 'We didn't ask for this. Mr. Harper didn't say this is what he was going to do.'"

Martin, reminding listeners that he had to do some cuts himself in the 1990s when he was finance minister, said the Tories would have to reduce federal spending on programs and services or run a budget deficit for the first time since 1997.

"It's easy to make 196 promises, but it's much harder to make a choice — to choose between one program and another, one service or another," Martin said in a Vancouver speech, adding that the Conservatives face a possible \$23 billion shortfall in their budgeting.

But even as Martin is pulling out all the strategic stops in a bid to ward off defeat, his Liberals are starting to quietly amass the ingredients for a bitter blame game if the party loses power to the Conservatives. Two big dates with destiny now loom before the Liberals — Monday, when it's all decided, and the day after, when the recriminations and post-mortems will be unleashed in the wake of defeat.

There are plenty of targets already: Martin himself and his team of advisers, the media, voters, warring factions inside the Liberal tent, the RCMP and plain old fate and bad luck.

A grim mood is starting to bubble up among the party faithful.

It doesn't seem to matter that Martin's closest advisers have studiously avoided public attention lately, notably David Herle, the campaign chair, and Scott Reid, communications director. They are being branded as a problem, too "in the bubble" with Martin and too distant from the grassroots.

One long-time Liberal said yesterday that the problems of this campaign began the day after the 2004 vote, when Martin said he wouldn't make any changes in his inner circle.

One former ministerial aide, who has worked closely with the Martin inner circle, compared the Liberals' current situation to a doomed Russian submarine. "I feel like I am on the Kursk and the oxygen is getting perilously low," the ex-aide said.

Yet another, also known as a loyalist to the Martin camp, said: "Unless something huge happens, I believe the fat lady is past the chorus." For this Liberal in Toronto, the party is up against a growing public appetite for change, as well as "a bit of a backlash against what is seen by the media to be arrogance."

At the senior levels of the Liberal party, it's generally accepted that the RCMP's Dec. 28 announcement of a criminal investigation of the Liberal government over its handling of the income trust tax decision put the campaign in a tailspin.

"There's no doubt that people wanted to give us a bit of spanking" over Liberal ethical issues arising from the sponsorship scandal, said one strategist. But until the RCMP probe emerged in late December, the Martin team felt it had managed to some extent to put that problem behind them. But news that the Mounties were investigating a possible leak of information before the income trust decision was announced and alleged insider trading on the markets changed the entire picture.

"I don't know if we were in a position to carry another scandal on our back," one Liberal insider says. There has also been second guessing about the Liberals' decision to run a low-key campaign before Christmas on the assumption that voters were distracted. But that tactic allowed Harper to define himself in the campaign by announcing a string of new policies before the holidays.

But one adviser to Martin said the timing of the Liberals' policy announcements — and even the policies themselves — were a secondary consideration. Martin and his party would stand or fall on

voters' assessment of how they had performed in the 17-month life of the minority government, the source said.

"We had to run on our record — there was no choice about that."

Liberals are also convinced they have had a rougher ride from the media in the campaign than the Conservatives.

Some put it down to reporters' preference for change, which tends to make a better news story than the continuation of the Martin regime. And reporters naturally want to challenge the "Liberal giant" that has been in power for 13 years, as one well-connected Liberal put it.

In the assessment of how the media has handled the Martin campaign this time, there is some grumbling about a lack of rapport between Martin's media handlers and the press, which some say may be the product of a too confrontational approach in the Prime Minister's media shop for the past year and a half.

A feeling of helplessness — that little more can be done to turn the Liberal campaign around — is beginning to set in among Liberal staffers working on various regional campaigns.

None of the staffers interviewed were willing to point out any big mistakes the central Liberal campaign has made, nor did they have any fresh ideas about what the campaign should be doing, but rather their sense is that too many Canadians have just given up on returning the Liberals to power.

"If they really do want change and they really hate our platform, then what can you do about it? What else can you do?" said one staffer , who spoke anonymously.

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