

Signs, everywhere signs, but where's Martin's name?

Election signs omit leader's name

Wording up to ridings, say Liberals

Jan. 21, 2006. 01:00 AM

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Call it a cruel sign of the times — Paul Martin's name has just about vanished from Liberal election signs.

Once his party's most prized asset, the Prime Minister appears to be a liability to Liberal candidates scrambling to save their seats on Monday.

While there are still some of the "Team Martin" signs from the 2004 campaign and a few newer ones with the slogan "Paul Martin's Liberals," more and more candidates have shunned the M-word.

"It may be an expression of the frustration of the candidates and obviously we can understand why they would be," EKOS Research Associates president Frank Graves says.

"Clearly, I don't think there's any major brand equity or asset value in Paul Martin for Liberals running," Graves says.

"Paul Martin came into office as quite possibly the most trusted politician in living Canadian history. We've seen one of the most precipitous declines — if not the most precipitous decline — in trust in a key national leader that we've ever seen," he says.

Liberal campaign official Stephen Heckbert says candidates are free to choose their signs.

"There is a template. It consists of red and white. We provide candidates with a template, but after that they make their own decisions about whether they want to follow the national template strictly or not."

Asked if it's because Martin is a liability that his name quietly disappeared from signs, Heckbert says: "Nothing could be further from the truth. Local candidates always run their local way."

Heckbert says because of vandalism during the campaign, candidates have had to reorder signs.

"Sometimes it's faster to reproduce them if you only really have 'elect' or 're-elect' the name of the candidate and authorized by the official agent."

Beaches-East York Liberal incumbent Maria Minna, who is in a fierce battle with NDP candidate Marilyn Churley, Conservative Peter Conroy and Green Party Leader Jim Harris, recently changed her signs.

Stressing that "there's no drag on my campaign" from Martin, Minna's new banners do not mention the leader.

"In the last couple of weeks we reprinted a small number (of signs) with my picture on it, which I've never done before," says the MP, who was first elected in 1993.

"My team just said: 'Oh come on, it's different, it's upbeat and it's fresh and it's a different twist coming to the end of the campaign.' I said 'fine.'"

Some Liberal candidates even avoid uttering the words "Paul Martin."

On Monday night in Bracebridge, Agriculture Minister Andy Mitchell did not mention Martin's name during a 90-minute all-candidates' meeting.

Sharon McMann, campaign chair for Northumberland-Quinte West incumbent Paul Macklin, bristled when asked why neither Martin nor the Liberal party was mentioned on her candidate's radio ads.

"You're reading into it more than what's there," says McMann, adding that the similarity between the names Macklin and Martin is behind the omission.

"We made no conscious effort to separate ourselves from Paul Martin or the Liberal party," she says.

Trinity-Spadina incumbent Tony Ianno does not include Martin's name on his signs, but campaign manager Tom Allison says that's because his candidate recycles old ones that date back to the Jean Chrétien era.

Allison says "the dumbest thing that a campaign can do" is to try to distance itself from the party leader.

Still, examples from past elections show it can be prudent.

In 1990, then-Liberal premier David Peterson suffered the ignominy of his own cabinet ministers excising his photo from their pamphlets. Some, like then-attorney general Ian Scott, managed to salvage their seats while Peterson lost his own — and the election.

Then, there is the opposite effect. In June 2001, then-Progressive Conservative premier Mike Harris used his name to tout Vaughan-King-Aurora by-election candidate Joyce Frustaglio.

Frustaglio's signs dubbed her the "Mike Harris candidate," and the premier's name appeared in a font four times as large as hers. She lost by a margin of almost two to one to Liberal Greg Sorbara. Harris announced his retirement from politics less than four months later.

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