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## Martin: 'Hang on to your hats'

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OTTAWA BUREAU CHIEF

Canadians are in for a raucous final two weeks in the election campaign, says Prime Minister [Paul Martin](#), as the June 28 vote blazes down into an intense fight between the Conservatives and his Liberals.

"Hang on to your hats," Martin said yesterday. "I think that this is going to be a couple of weeks for the ages."

After a week in which the Liberals slipped to second place and Martin's campaign chairman David Herle candidly acknowledged the party was "desperate," the Prime Minister is now staring at the prospect of defeat.

His final campaign pitch rests on the hope that Canadians will be as jolted by the possibility of a Liberal loss as he is.

New polls are showing that Martin and his team may have some faint grounds for that hope. A Toronto Star-La Presse poll, carried out this week by EKOS Research Associates, shows that Canadians are leaning toward Liberal-type policies, and expect Liberal-style government, even though the Conservatives now lead in popular support.

"Canadians are somewhat aware that in the rush to punish the Liberals for real and imagined sins, they may in fact be setting the country on a course inconsistent with dominant values," EKOS president Frank Graves says.

Yesterday, a new overnight poll by SES Research Associates showed the Conservatives slipping back into a virtual tie with the Liberals, 34 per cent to 33 per cent, a result, the poll analysis said, of the focus on social issues. SES chairman Nik Nanos found that female voters especially are being turned away from the Conservatives in this climate, and it was this group that Martin sought to address yesterday, when he delivered a keynote speech to a high-powered group of women business leaders in Toronto.

Martin told reporters that next week's TV debates are the kickoff to the final duel, and that he will be using the heightened public attention to speak beyond his rivals and directly to Canadians whom he hopes are using the final two weeks to make up their minds about their vote on June 28.

He repeatedly described himself as optimistic, clearly a strategy to keep Liberal troops and morale up for the final stretch. "The crucial period is beginning," Martin said in his speech. "This election matters. It matters because in fact the outcome will, I believe, make a real difference in your life and the life of this country ... To those who may feel that all political parties are the same, I encourage you to become engaged, to listen to the exchange of ideas and to listen for the sound of the Canada that you want."

He invited the luncheon crowd of about 300 people, members of the Women's Executive Network, to draw the sharp distinction between his record and promises and those of Conservative Leader [Stephen Harper](#).

"The effectiveness of our national government as a force for good would be curtailed" if the Conservatives win,



TYLER ANDERSON/TORONTO STAR  
Hands held high, Prime Minister Paul Martin acknowledges a crowd of voters during a visit to a restaurant on Spadina Ave. yesterday afternoon.

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Martin said. "We would be smaller within our own borders."

Harper did not campaign yesterday. He is preparing for the two televised leaders' debates — in French Monday night and English Tuesday night.

Citing his own record as someone who kept his promises and managed the nation's finances well during a decade in government, the Liberal leader tried to illustrate how much the Conservatives could need to cut from the federal government to meet what Martin argues is a \$50 billion shortfall between the Tories' promises and the current fiscal situation.

That would take vast cuts over a five-year mandate, Martin said, the equivalent of eliminating the departments of citizenship and immigration, justice, heritage, foreign affairs, fisheries and oceans and natural resources. "He could eliminate all of these departments in one fell swoop and he would have almost enough money to cover his shortfall. ... His plan just simply doesn't add up."

In contrast, Martin said, the Liberals are promising what is manageable and more consistent with Canadians' values. He vowed that he would reduce waiting times for medical procedures in the health-care system and lamented that the issue is now the subject of a Supreme Court of Canada case.

He said he would create extra child-care spaces and he wouldn't wait for the provinces to join the program — the obstacle to fulfilment of past Liberal day-care promises.

"I have built my career on doing what I say I'm going to do. I'm not going to change now. No job is worth that," Martin said, to applause from the women.

"Under a Liberal government, fundamental rights will not be open to negotiation," he said. "I will defend the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and I will defend a woman's right to choose."

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