

Martin fights for last-minute turnaround

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OTTAWA — Paul Martin, facing a desperate three-day fight for his political life, is warning that a Conservative government would bring the most extreme right-wing agenda in the history of Canada.

The prime minister launched his most blistering attack yet on Stephen Harper, suggesting Thursday that the Tory leader would stack the courts with socially conservative judges to overturn Charter rights such as gay marriage and access to abortion.

"This is not an ordinary election," Martin said in Toronto.

"Never have we seen a significant political party with such a conservative agenda as this one — an agenda that's really drawn from the extreme right in the United States."

He made the comments with two new polls showing the Tories holding a six-point lead in the run-up to Monday's election.

An SES survey done for the Cable Public Affairs Channel put the Conservatives at 37 per cent support, compared with 31 for the Liberals and 17 for the NDP.

An EKOS poll conducted for the

Toronto Star had the Tories at 35 per cent and the Liberals at 29.

The Conservatives dismissed Martin's criticism as "complete nonsense."

"This man is absolutely panicking and is just throwing up something and hoping something sticks against the Conservative party," said Tory justice critic Vic Toews.

Toews noted that Martin blocked Conservative efforts to make the appointment process for Supreme Court judges more transparent.

"For this guy to suggest that that is our agenda when he has been doing everything to oppose a more open system . . . is sheer hypocrisy."

Harper moved Thursday to reassure moderate voters by saying that outlawing gay marriage wouldn't be one of his top five priorities. But in the same breath, he said any effort by the Liberal-dominated Senate to block such a measure would be an "abuse of power."

On Tuesday, Harper attempted to ease concerns about a Tory majority by noting that the Senate — along with the courts — would be a check on Tory power.

However, he's now making it clear that he expects the upper chamber to defer to the House of

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"That's why after an election we'll ask the MPs elected by the people their opinion on controversial questions that were issues in this campaign," Harper said in Waterdown, Ont.

Harper has repeatedly said he would not try to change the law regarding abortion. He has said, however, that he would allow a free vote by MPs on banning same-sex marriage.

Martin said Canadians don't want to reopen "huge debates" on divisive social issues, and he called on "progressive forces" from all parties to unite to defeat Harper.

He made a direct appeal to New Democrats to back him, saying only the Liberals stand a chance of defeating the Tories — "and (NDP Leader) Jack Layton better get out of the way."

The Tories said Martin has a lot of nerve attacking them on the abortion issue considering that, in 1989, he called for a new abortion law after the old one was thrown out by the courts.

While Martin was hammering on Harper, the Tory leader was sticking to a campaign message that has resonated with voters — a promise to clean up government ethics, cut taxes, set minimum medical wait times and crack down on gun crime.

For his part, Layton was campaigning in B.C., where his party is in a tight race with the Conservatives in many ridings.

Layton said that with the Grits in disarray, only his party can safeguard social programs and human rights against a Conservative onslaught.

He also charged that Harper is more interested in tax cuts for banks and oil companies than creating services for people.

In a surprise development Thursday, a Liberal candidate in Quebec conceded defeat and urged his supporters to vote for the Conservative party.

Gilles Savard threw his support behind the Tories to stave off a Bloc Quebecois victory in the Bloc stronghold of Jonquiere-Alma.

Conservative candidate Jean-Pierre Blackburn welcomed last-minute support, but cautioned it likely won't be enough to avert a Bloc victory.

In Montreal, Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe asked Harper to clarify his position on Quebec's language laws.

The Bloc leader told more than 750 University of Montreal students that he won't let Harper attack Bill 101, which protects the French language.

Duceppe said that in 1999, when Harper was president of the National Citizens Coalition, that organization helped fund challenges against Bill 101.

He suggested Harper could support such challenges again.

Recent polls have indicated the Conservatives are on the verge of a breakthrough in Quebec, which could explain why Duceppe played the language card to try to keep francophone voters in his camp.

The SES telephone poll of 1,200 Canadians was conducted Monday to Wednesday and is considered

accurate to within 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The EKOS poll questioned 839 people across the country by telephone Wednesday and is considered accurate to within 3.4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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