

Canada's election will turn on trust

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Are Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberals so tainted by the sponsorship scandal that they are no longer fit to govern the country? Are Stephen Harper's Conservatives finally ready for prime time? Have Jack Layton's New Democrats earned the protest vote?

These are questions Canadians must ponder as they brace for a Christmas election campaign that could start Monday if the opposition makes good on its threat to bring down the government. That campaign promises to be unpopular, brutishly negative and just maybe inconsequential.

While today's EKOS poll for the *Star* and *La Presse* shows the Liberals widening their lead over the Conservatives, there is no certainty Parliament will look much different at the end of the day.

Still, the sheer campaign dynamics will be novel, in the wake of Mr. Justice John Gomery's damning report on Liberal "greed, venality and misconduct" on Jean Chrétien's watch. While Gomery exonerated Martin personally from "any blame for carelessness or misconduct," the opposition nonetheless claims the Liberals lack the moral authority to govern after 12 years in power. With a vote coming likely in mid-January rather than the spring, voters will get an early opportunity to pronounce not only on Liberal malfeasance but also on the opposition's credibility.

Most campaigns turn on the question of trust, namely which party the voters most trust to deliver on promises. However, this election may be won by the party that inspires the *least mistrust* when it comes to delivering good governance or handling a wide range of issues, from Canada-United States relations to Quebec separatism, taxes and medicare. Polls, though, suggest no party has yet won the public's trust.

When the holiday festive good cheer wears off, Canadians will have serious choices to make. And Martin's frenetic pre-election manoeuvring has highlighted many of them.

Martin plans to campaign as the good economic steward who delivered eight consecutive surpluses, who pumped \$40 billion into medicare, who is now offering a \$30 billion personal income tax cut. He has also pledged more than \$15 billion in recent days for natives, the military, immigrants, the lumber industry, the arts and crime prevention. And Martin has begun to address the Ottawa-provincial fiscal imbalance, to meet Kyoto global warming commitments and to provide indirect support for cities.

Beyond that, Martin has sketched out a global role for Canada that encompasses closer security ties with the U.S., a combat role in Afghanistan fighting terror, more engagement with China and India and a sizeable hike in the \$20 billion spent on defence, diplomacy and foreign aid.

And Martin is championing Canada as "the way of the future" in Quebec, where sovereignists hope to stage another referendum on independence.

Whatever one's view of the Liberal program, it is intended to help the party reconnect with voters outraged by the sponsorship scandal.

And it may work, unless the opposition parties overcome public skepticism about their own fitness to govern by putting forward a coherent alternative set of policies that address the issues voters most care about.

Harper's Conservatives remain, at root, a Western-based socially conservative party that has had trouble connecting with Ontarians and has been frozen out of Quebec. While the Tories can credibly present themselves as the ethically clean alternative, Martin has outflanked Harper with his tax cuts and other fiscally conservative policies.

Layton's New Democrats cannot realistically hope to govern this time around. Still, they will appeal to voters who feel the Liberals have embraced an overly conservative agenda, when 1 million children live in poverty and when immigrants are having a tough time making their way.

If there is a redeeming feature to a midwinter campaign, it is that voters will have time to pass a cold,

reasoned judgment on the Liberals, and to reflect on what the opposition has to offer by way of practical alternatives. The campaign may kick off Monday but is unlikely to heat up until after New Year's. Between now and then, the opposition parties may want to leaven their moral outrage with policies designed to earn the public trust.

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