

'This is like a live grenade' for Liberal party

Struggle to hang on to power badly hurt by RCMP probe

Announcement has feel of a tipping point in election battle

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OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—The Liberals' struggle to hang on to power has been badly, perhaps fatally, damaged by the RCMP's blockbuster confirmation halfway through the campaign that it has launched a criminal investigation of a possible tax leak from Finance Minister Ralph Goodale's office.

Coming on the heels of a series of Liberal gaffes and miscues, the announcement from the Mounties this week has the feel of a tipping point in an election battle that had previously been almost impossible to handicap.

The probe will provide a useful club for Prime Minister Paul Martin's opponents when he faces off against the Conservative, New Democrat and Bloc Québécois leaders in the second round of debates on Jan. 9 and 10 in Montreal.

But above all, the Mounties' announcement will act as a glaring reminder to voters of the Liberal record of questionable ethical practices — particularly the sponsorship scandal — that led the opposition parties to topple the Liberal minority and send Canadians to the polls.

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper would like to define the election as a referendum on Liberal misdeeds and his contention that Martin's party has lost the "moral authority" to govern.

The Liberals have worked hard to focus voters' attention instead on their party's management of the economy and Martin's vision of a socially generous, inclusive country.

And in recent weeks, the Liberals had begun to hope they had — outside of Quebec — been fairly successful in putting the ethical issue behind them.

But news of the RCMP probe may alter the whole equation.

"This is like a live grenade has just been thrown down Paul Martin's pants," remarked Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research Associates. "I think the potential fallout from this is quite significant — as in, you know, might lose election rather than win."

He said the Liberals have in the past been hurt in the polls by revelations of unethical behaviour. Liberal popularity dropped sharply last spring when former ad executive Jean Brault revealed that taxpayers' money had gone to the Liberals during election campaigns and again when Justice John Gomery confirmed in November that there had been a kickback scheme involving Liberals under the sponsorship program.

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Graves said the backlash in the polls was short-lived in both instances and it remains to be seen how much lasting impact the RCMP probe will have on voters. But Liberal strategists should be worried, he said.

In the first half of the campaign, the Liberals were pleased that they were maintaining their lead in the polls despite Harper's barrage of daily policy announcements. Martin's strategists have for the most part kept their new campaign promises under wraps on the assumption that the public wasn't paying close attention yet.

"We think people are only going to begin tuning in next week," said a senior Liberal. As a result, the Martin team plans to unveil a series of fresh social policies when the campaign heats up again after New Year's.

The Liberals will need something to energize a campaign that sometimes lacks gusto and has been plagued by campaign-killing foul-ups. First, there was former prime minister Jean Chrétien's controversial announcement that he was going to court in an attempt to have Gomery's findings on the sponsorship mess quashed.

Then came Martin spokesman Scott Reid's quip that parents would just spend the \$25 a week they would get from a Harper government for daycare expenses on "beer and popcorn."

But that paled in comparison to Liberal organizer Mike Klander's Internet posting, in which he compared NDP candidate Olivia Chow, wife of NDP Leader Jack Layton, to a chow chow dog. Klander resigned his post with the Ontario wing of the federal Liberals but the condemnations continue to reverberate. And then the RCMP stepped in.

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