



Sep. 28, 2003. 01:00 AM

Premier's `links' to Martin flop: Poll

Premier misfired with appeal to federal Liberal

Conservative strategy gives McGuinty a boost

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Ontario Premier Ernie Eves' attempt to link himself politically to Liberal prime minister-in-waiting Paul Martin has backfired, according to a new Toronto Star poll.

Eves first tried to align himself with Martin's policies during last Tuesday's televised leaders' debate when he named the next Liberal leader six times, and went on to repeatedly invoke Martin's name in virtually every speech on the campaign trail all last week.

But the Star poll conducted by EKOS Research Associates in the two evenings following the debate shows that the Tory Premier's rather odd strategy has in effect given his Liberal opponent, Dalton McGuinty, a boost.

EKOS asked respondents which of the three Ontario leaders they thought would be best able to work with a federal government led by Paul Martin once Prime Minister Jean Chrétien retires early next year.

A majority of the 1,023 people surveyed, or 54 per cent, picked McGuinty, while just 22 per cent chose Eves and 8 per cent chose NDP Leader Howard Hampton.

"Premier Eves misfired on the appeal to Paul Martin during the debate," said EKOS President Frank Graves of the move, which he labelled "desperate" on the part of the Tories.

Federal Liberals shied away from any alignment with the policies of Eves or former premier Mike Harris, fearing the link might actually damage Martin in a widely anticipated spring federal election.

Eves told audiences across Ontario last week that he and Martin worked well together when they were finance ministers in their respective governments and he said that Martin "gets it" that more tax cuts are necessary if Canada is to remain competitive.

"Dalton McGuinty and Jean Chrétien still don't get it," Eves told a luncheon audience in Oakville last week.

Liberal strategists said Eves and the Tories were clearly trying to cash in on some of the popularity that Martin is experiencing as he prepares to take over the leadership of his party, while Tories defended the move, saying Martin and Eves are more alike than most people might realize.

Martin wrestled with the federal government's deficit during his time in finance and also began to deliver some tax cuts to Canadians — a track record that closely mirrors Eves' own during his time as finance minister and deputy premier to Mike Harris.

Eves often refers to a speech Martin gave Sept. 18 to the Montreal Board of Trade in which he outlined some rough plans for the nation, including an emphasis on debt reduction.

But the main thrust of the future Liberal leader's speech was more in keeping with McGuinty's own stump speech in this campaign.

Martin stressed the need for Canada to exploit the "knowledge-based" economy of the future — a line that is familiar

to those who have been listening to McGuinty sing the praises of a highly-educated and skilled workforce as the true road to prosperity.

Speaking to the Star's editorial board on Friday, McGuinty was asked about the confusion among some voters between the federal and provincial Liberals and acknowledged that some of the votes his party receives in Thursday's election may be from people who think they are voting for Martin.

"I won't look a gift horse in the mouth," McGuinty joked, saying he is aware that some people do make that mistake, but stressing that he has campaigned hard on provincial issues and is confident that most Ontario voters are well aware of both him and his platform.

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