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Ontario could doom Liberals

Voters might surprise themselves

[THOMAS WALKOM](#)

Paul Martin is in big trouble in Ontario.

A Toronto Star poll shows his Liberals heading toward minority government status. But interviews with voters in Canada's largest province indicate this could be the best-case scenario for the Prime Minister and his governing party.

Ontarians are so mad at the federal Liberals — but so sure they are going to win anyway — that they could end up inadvertently bouncing them from office altogether.

Call it the law of perverse results. Or, perhaps, poetic justice.

Take Irene Raissis. She and her husband have voted Liberal federally ever since they arrived in Canada from Germany 50 years ago. But this time, says the Etobicoke woman, they're breaking with tradition.

"I don't care for him (Martin) personally," she says. "One of these days, his face is going to crack with that constant smile."

Raissis cites the sponsorship scandal and other examples of what she calls federal misspending as reasons for her switch.

"All that money didn't do anything," she says. "They might have dropped it in the middle of the road."

The Liberal attacks on Conservative Leader Stephen Harper have had some effect on her — in particular Martin's claim that the federal Tories will do to Canada what former premier Mike Harris did to Ontario.

"I'm afraid of the Conservatives after what we've been through with Harris," she admits. "I'm afraid Harper will be too friendly to the Americans."

But her fear isn't enough to make her vote Liberal. Instead, she plans to vote New Democrat.

She expects that what will emerge on June 28 is a minority Liberal government led by Martin. That, she says, would be just fine.

"Let them be scared," she says. "They've been too smug."

In interview after interview this week, the same pattern emerged. Yesterday, an EKOS poll done for the Star showed the Liberals and Conservatives running virtually neck and neck in Ontario, with 40 per cent of decided voters supporting the Grits and 35 per cent the Tories.

So I called some of the Ontarians who had been polled by EKOS. I also called some I've interviewed at random before doing these types of stories.

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Of those, a few say they are still planning to vote Liberal — although often with little enthusiasm.

"We've seen them before. We know how they work," says Markham secretary Lucy Duncan.

"Martin seems to know what he's doing," echoes Moni Khowessah, a retired engineer in North Bay.

"I'd like to kick them out but I don't know who to turn to," says David Tanguay, an unemployed programmer living in Kitchener.

A few, like Dave Tessier of Goderich or Oshawa area farmer Merlyn Rae, say they haven't made up their minds.

Others, such as Sault Ste. Marie nurse Carol Patterson, are New Democrat voters who plan to stick with that party.

But most I talked to say they are fed up. They're not impressed by Martin. They don't think the Liberals deserve to be re-elected — but expect they will be anyway.

Many say they are wary of Harper and his new Conservative party but will vote for him on the assumption that he can't win.

Douglas Grant is a retired dermatologist living in the Lake Huron village of Bayfield, near Goderich. A former Liberal voter, he plans to cast his ballot for the Conservatives this time.

"I'm not sure if Harper would make a good prime minister or not," he says. "I don't know enough about the man. But he won't have a chance ... I think the Liberals will win a minority government.

"Minority governments are not all that bad."

Indeed, the assumption of Liberal invincibility may be Martin's real nightmare. Ontario accounts for 106 of the 308 seats in the Commons. The election will be won or lost for the Liberals here.

Across the country, Martin's lead has already narrowed significantly.

The Star's EKOS poll found that 38 per cent of decided voters nationally now plan to cast ballots for the Liberals, compared to 30 per cent for the Conservatives.

Nonetheless, 64 per cent of Ontarians expect the Liberals to win on June 28 no matter what happens.

This sets up a peculiar dynamic. If voters normally inclined to the Liberals think Martin's party is sure to win, they may feel more comfortable casting a ballot for someone else.

And if enough think that such vote shifting is politically costless, they could end up electing another party — probably the now second-place Conservatives.

This is what happened in the Ontario provincial election of 1990 when voters, angry at the Liberals of then-premier David Peterson, inadvertently elected Bob Rae's New Democrats.

'They (the Liberals) are complacent; they think they can do anything ... I'd like to see a Liberal minority. Maybe then they'll smarten up.'

Larry Klein, Fort Erie school bus driver

Martin's other big problem has to do with the province's small-c conservative voters. In the last two federal

elections, many of these were attracted to the Liberals by that party's frugal economic policies — crafted in large part by then-finance minister Martin.

The remaining conservative voters split their votes between two right-wing parties, the Alliance and the old Progressive Conservatives.

As a result, the Liberals swept Ontario. In the 2000 election, they won 100 of the province's then 103 Commons seats.

Now the Alliance and Progressive Conservatives have merged into Harper's Conservative Party of Canada. To continue their stranglehold on Ontario, the Liberals have to hold onto their own right wing and attract enough former Progressive Conservatives to hobble the new Harper party.

In effect, they have to persuade these voters that Martin is a more reliable conservative than Harper, or, in the words of former Progressive Conservative leader Joe Clark, that the current prime minister is at least the devil they know.

But that doesn't seem to be working for Martin either.

William Palmer is a retired marketing man who lives in Scarborough. He had heart bypass surgery two years ago.

"I can't complain about the service; I can't complain about that at all," he says. Still, he says more needs to be done to fix the health system.

He voted Liberal in 1997 but switched back to the Progressive Conservatives three years later.

He's the kind of voter Martin needs to cripple Harper. He's the kind of voter Martin was aiming at when he unveiled his \$9 billion health plan this week.

But Palmer says he's not going back to the Liberals. Instead, he says he is leaning to Harper

"My concern with the Liberals is that they've promised all of this (health-care remedies) before. Why don't they just do something? All they had to do was take a look at their own promises and act.

"Martin should read Chrétien's Red Book," he said, referring to the list of Liberal promises released during the 1993 election campaign that was co-authored by then-backbench MP Martin.

"There have been too many promises not kept. They had the opportunity."

From Norwood, near Peterborough, health worker Carol Ann Best blasts away at the Liberals. Best works in a nursing home, a tough job for anyone in an industry that is chronically understaffed. ("It's brutal," she says. "No question.")

She can't find a family doctor. A nurse practitioner in nearby Havelock took her on as a patient but only after Best pleaded. She thinks there should be more money put into health care, but doesn't think she should pay higher taxes to fund it.

Instead, she says, the money should come from somewhere else — maybe by cutting back the salaries and benefits paid to teachers.

The Ontario Liberal government's decision to impose new health taxes has infuriated her

"We are conservative people here," she says.

Best and her husband used to vote Liberal. But this time, they plan to vote Conservative, even though she doesn't

expect Harper to do much to fix the health system she feels is so important.

Reached in his Toronto dry-cleaning delivery van, 28-year-old Aaron Murdoch says he too plans to vote for Harper.

"I don't really like any of them," he confesses. "But I think the Conservatives might do a little better.

"I'm not normally a Liberal guy. I voted ... last time for (then-Alliance leader) Stockwell Day. Maybe some thought he was a bit too radical, but I thought he was all right.

"I'm a little sick of the Liberals. They've had their time."

From Oakville, Diana Topping prepares to vote in her first Canadian election. Originally from South Africa, she's a business recruiter who thinks the health system needs to be made more efficient.

Who can best do this?

"At this moment," she says, "I think the Conservatives. Definitely not the Liberals. They just want to spend more money.

"I'm not enamoured by Harper. But what's the alternative?"

In Fort Erie, Larry Klein drives a school bus. Usually a Liberal voter, he thinks Martin is a decent man.

But he doesn't think the Prime Minister is a great leader.

"He doesn't have that spark," says Klein.

Klein's main complaint, though, is that the Liberals have been in power too long. So he's planning to vote Conservative, even though he doesn't think Harper has a chance of forming a majority government.

"They (the Liberals) are complacent; they think they can do anything ... They are too sure of themselves.

"I'd like to see a Liberal minority. I'd like to give them a boot in the ass. Maybe then they'll smarten up."

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