

Canadian prime minister tries to revive campaign

Reuters

MONTREAL - Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin, whose Liberals look set to lose the January 23 election, on Sunday tried to rally flagging support in a traditional stronghold and said he does not believe voters want him out.

Polls show the Liberals -- hit by scandals, a poor campaign and voter fatigue -- will be ousted after more than 12 years in power by the opposition Conservatives led by Stephen Harper.

Liberal insiders privately concede they cannot win, and a key minister in Martin's government admitted she was having trouble keeping her campaign afloat.

But Martin shrugged off suggestions he was in trouble and took issue with polls that show Canadians want a change in government.

"The issue is -- change for what?" he asked reporters in Montreal, citing what he said were Conservative policies that would damage the country at home and abroad. "I don't believe that's the kind of change that Canadians want."

An SES/CPAC poll said the Conservatives were unchanged at 38 percent of public support while the Liberals were up by 1 point to 30 percent. The figures suggest Harper would be close to winning a majority government if the vote were held now.

Martin's minority government was brought down in late November over a Liberal kickback scandal in the French-speaking province of Quebec. The affair ate into Liberal support and was particularly damaging in Quebec, where the party has 21 of the province's 75 parliamentary seats.

CRUMBLING SUPPORT

Most of those seats are in and around the city of Montreal, long a bedrock of Liberal support. But local polls now show even this bastion is crumbling, forcing Martin to spend two days campaigning there.

The lowest number of Quebec seats the Liberals have ever won is 13. The party could sink below that level as it is squeezed by the Conservatives and the separatist Bloc Quebecois, which wants independence for the province.

One top organizer in Quebec forecast the Liberals would take 12 seats.

When Martin addressed a rally for Heritage Minister Liza Frulla in Montreal on Sunday, barely 40 people were in the room. Frulla, who won her seat by just 72 votes in the June 2004 election, acknowledged she had a battle on her hands.

"It was very difficult (in 2004) and it's still very hard, very hard here on the ground," she told reporters.

To add to Martin's challenges, Harper is campaigning in normally pro-Liberal areas where his party has not won seats for years. He has regularly attracted hundreds of people to his rallies.

He drew 250 to a Sunday rally in western Quebec, returning to a district where he has high hopes of taking a Liberal seat, and said he needed the Conservative candidate in his cabinet. Cabinet members are usually drawn from Parliament.

The Conservatives had no legislators from Quebec in the last Parliament but now are on track to win between three and 12.

"I extend my hand to Quebeckers. ... Together we can turn the page on 13 years of waste, incompetence and corruption," he said.

Afterward, Harper was set to fly to New Brunswick to try to pick off three more Liberal seats.

Martin found a more enthusiastic crowd waiting for him on Sunday afternoon in North Bay, Ontario, Canada's most populous province and another Liberal stronghold.

Martin said Harper's spending promises would leave a C\$22 billion hole (\$19.5 billion) in the federal budget and require spending cuts.

"What else is on the chopping block? Why won't he tell us?" he asked a cheering crowd of 200 supporters. The day before Harper drew some 600 people in North Bay.

The Conservatives say their plans yield a surplus.

(\$1=\$1.16 Canadian)

(Additional reporting by Randall Palmer with Harper)

Copyright 2006 Reuters News Service. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright © 2006 ABC News Internet Ventures