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Canada's Martin Enters `Life and Death' TV Debates (Update2)

June 14 (Bloomberg) -- Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberal Party is faring so badly in pre-election polls that last week he left his first Group of Eight leaders summit early and skipped former President Ronald Reagan's funeral.

Martin returned to prepare for two televised debates today and tomorrow that may represent his best chance to reverse the party's plunge in popularity to 32 percent from almost 50 percent in December, according to Ipsos-Reid. He'll face Stephen Harper, whose Conservative Party is heading into the June 28 election with about 31 percent support, the New Democratic Party's Jack Layton and Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe.

`It's life and death' for Martin, said Stephen Clarkson, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto and author of a biography on former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

Martin, 65, has lost so much ground in Ontario, which elects more than a third of Canada's 308 members of Parliament, that the Conservatives may win more seats for the first time since 1988. Still, the race is close enough that neither party appears to be headed for a solid majority, so a government may be formed by the one that builds the coalition with the most votes in the House of Commons.

Toronto-based SES Research, which has been running daily polls since May 25, said today that the Conservatives were favored by 34 percent of the 600 respondents it phoned June 11- 13, one point ahead of the Liberals. Layton's New Democrats, who are promising to boost taxes on the wealthy to pay for more social programs, had 18 percent in the poll, which has a margin of error of 4.1 percentage points.

Conservative Surge

The four party leaders will debate first in French at 8 p.m. in Ottawa and then in English tomorrow, also in Ottawa. Parties without any elected representatives in Parliament, such as the Green Party, weren't invited to participate.

Under Harper, who has promised tax cuts and said he would allow free votes on bills to restrict abortion and gay rights, the Conservatives have surged after trailing the Liberals by 16 percentage points before Martin called the election three weeks ago, according to Ipsos-Reid. Magazines such as Macleans and newspapers including the Globe and Mail have begun profiling Harper, 45, as the emerging favorite to become Canada's next prime minister.

`Team Martin'

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Martin succeeded Jean Chretien as prime minister in December. He called a vote after only five months to win a popular mandate and rally support for his leadership after feuding with Chretien and his supporters in the Liberal Party, such as former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley.

Martin's strategists broke with tradition by placing his likeness on campaign signs for all the party's candidates and substituting ``Team Martin" for the Liberal name. His campaign has emphasized health care, pledging C\$9 billion in additional funding, and denounced Harper's plan to reduce taxes and spend more on the military as a threat to Canada's social programs and its record string of seven budget surpluses.

Neither that message nor the credibility Martin built as the finance minister under Chretien who ended a quarter-century of budget deficits are resonating with enough voters. Instead, many are focusing on the revelation in February that Chretien's government gave C\$100 million to advertising firms with party connections in return for little or no work in the so-called sponsorship scandal.

``I'm a little disappointed in the direction," of the Liberal campaign, Anthony Franceschini, chief executive of Edmonton, Alberta-based engineering firm Stantec Inc., said in a telephone interview. ``There aren't those huge, fundamental philosophical differences between Liberals and Conservatives."

Ontario Budget Fallout

Martin, speaking at a press conference last week, said voters are ``cynical" after 11 years of Liberal rule.

Martin, who was finance minister while the funds were being disbursed to boost the federal government's profile in French-speaking Quebec, has said he knew nothing of the payouts and offered to resign if he's found to have lied. He then suspended a Parliamentary investigation into the matter less than two weeks before his May 23 election call.

``The sponsorship scandal influenced me tremendously," said Josee Lusignan, a university student in Montreal who now plans to vote for the Bloc Quebecois, which advocates Quebec's separation from Canada. ``I have no confidence whatsoever in the Liberals."

In Ontario, the party has fallen out of favor since the province's Liberal government broke an election promise and increased taxes in its budget last month. That's a reversal from the past three federal elections, when the Liberals lost only six contests for seats in Canada's most-populous province.

'Mood for Change'

An Ipsos-Reid poll of 1,000 people conducted May 28 to June 7 showed Premier Dalton McGuinty's provincial Liberals with 32 percent support, down from 46 percent when he was elected in October. In the same poll, reported today in the Globe and Mail, 28 percent said they'll vote against Martin because of the Ontario budget.

Harper, who has a master's degree in economics from the University of Calgary, is benefiting as voters consider whether they want to extend the Liberal Party's string of four governments. In the latest SES poll, only 24 percent said the Liberals were doing a good job, a 4 percentage point decline from the start of the campaign. Fifty-nine percent said it's time for a new government, the highest SES has recorded.

``I've been talking to a lot of people, and the people are reporting that the mood for change is definitely taking root," said Kerry Reinke, president of a local property owners association in Oakville, Ontario, southwest of Toronto.

Finance Minister Ralph Goodale remains confident that the two weeks left in the campaign will be enough to restore faith in Martin and the party. Eventually, voters will realize that the Liberal Party's policies hew closest to what Canadians want in their government, he

said.

Close Race Expected

``It's time to rally to the flag," Manley, who was Goodale's predecessor as finance minister and quit politics before the campaign, told reporters in Calgary on June 6. ``It's time to think about what is at stake in this election."

Martin last week said he had no intention of changing his strategy and that he always expected a close race.

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