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Canada's Martin, Behind in Polls, Takes Aim at Harper (Update1)

June 16 (Bloomberg) -- Stephen Harper, whose Conservative Party has the most support heading into Canada's June 28 federal election, fended off attacks from Prime Minister Paul Martin in the second of two televised debates.

Martin, who leads the Liberal Party, sought to jumpstart his sputtering campaign by challenging Harper's stance on abortion, military spending, health care and the environment in the debate late yesterday in Ottawa. About a quarter of voters remain undecided with two weeks to go before the vote, polls show.

``The major question here was whether Harper could appear to be a credible leader and possible prime minister," Jon Pammett, who teaches political science at Carleton University, said in an interview from Ottawa. ``His style and conduct didn't give people a reason to vote against him."

Harper, a 45-year-old trained economist who has never served in government, the New Democratic Party's Jack Layton and Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe picked up where they left off in last night's French-language debate by attacking Martin over a spending scandal.

Martin, 65, repeated his defense that he never knew the government funneled C\$100 million (\$73 million) to advertising firms with Liberal ties for little or no work, detailed the steps he has taken to find out what happened and promised to punish those responsible.

Squandered Lead

``It wasn't as fiery or exciting as it could have been," Tamara Gotlieb, a pollster at Compas Inc., said in an interview from Ottawa. Nikita Nanos, president of pollster SES Research, said that ``there was no clear winner."

A draw may not be enough to revive Martin's floundering fortunes. Since inheriting a majority government from former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien in December, Martin has squandered his party's lead in opinion polls and now trails the Conservatives.

Stephen Clarkson, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, said in comments before the debates that they represented ``life and death" for Martin.

Martin's Liberals had a 9 point lead when he called the election on May 23, according to a survey by Ipsos-Reid for the Globe and Mail and CTV network. That dropped to 31 percent in an Ipsos-Reid survey of 1,000 adults Friday to Sunday, compared with 32 percent for the Conservatives.

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Toronto-based SES, which releases a daily poll on voting intentions, said today that the Conservatives had 33 percent support to the Liberals' 32 percent.

Abortion Debate

Harper drew fire for comments last week that he would open Canada's House of Commons to free votes on bills restricting abortion and gay marriage. Such bills wouldn't have party sponsorship. Some Conservative Party members have said during the campaign that they favor limits on both.

Under attack from Martin, Harper said he wouldn't support any legislation limiting a woman's right to an abortion. ``You bring forward these rights issues to avoid the critical issues of scandal," Harper responded.

``I brought forth these rights issues because they are fundamental to our democracy," Martin shot back. ``If we're not prepared to defend minority rights, what we are saying is our values don't count."

The debate turned to Canada's publicly funded health-care system. Harper said he was open to allowing private companies to deliver some services as long as the government still paid. The others favor the existing system that restricts private involvement.

The leaders also sparred over whether Canada should have closer ties with the U.S. and whose programs were more affordable. All said they would extend Canada's string of seven budget surpluses.

To contact the reporter on this story:
Kevin Carmichael in Ottawa at kcarmichael@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story:
Erik Schatzker at eschatzker@bloomberg.net.

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