

Martin to fete Liberal donors at 24 Sussex

Opposition outraged PM's residence used to reward Grits' top benefactors

Anne Dawson, With files from Joe Paraskevas

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Paul Martin will continue a controversial Jean Chretien tradition by hosting a cocktail party at the prime minister's official residence as a reward for the Liberal party's top financial backers.

Mr. Martin has invited hundreds of members of the federal party's prestigious Laurier Club, exclusive to those Canadians who can afford to shell out \$1,000 to the Liberals each year, to 24 Sussex Drive on Wednesday evening.

It is a perk offered to high-rolling party contributors that began under Mr. Chretien, but was harshly criticized by opposition parties as a means of buying access to the PMO.

"There's absolutely no difference between Chretien and Martin on this front -- it's the old perception that access to the prime minister is closed unless you've got deep pockets," said Conservative MP Monte Solberg.

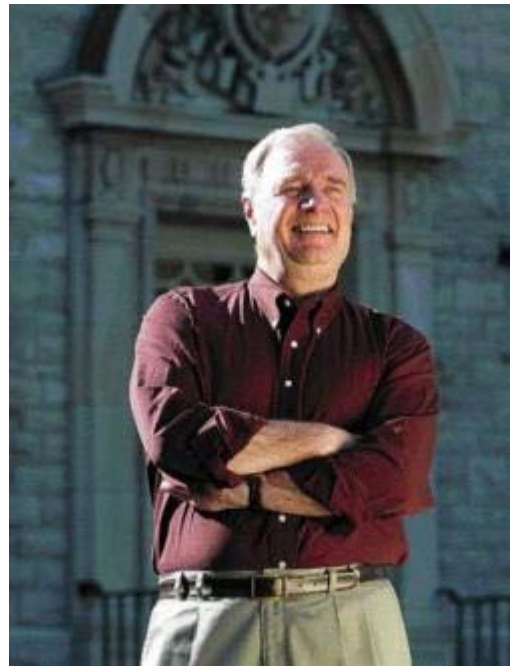
"You shouldn't allow someone to use his position as prime minister to use government property to help the Liberals raise funds. The reason why that property is available to (Mr. Martin) is because he is the prime minister of Canada, not the leader of the Liberal party."

Mr. Solberg added that Conservative leader Stephen Harper does not use Stornoway, the official residence of the opposition leader, to benefit financial contributors to his party.

Former Progressive Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney was hammered by the Liberals for functions he held on behalf of the Tory party's 500 Club, the equivalent of the Laurier Club, which gave contributors the privilege of private meetings with the prime minister or other cabinet ministers. Mr. Mulroney, however, did not use 24 Sussex for such gatherings.

Liberal spokesman Steven MacKinnon harshly dismissed such criticisms that 24 Sussex is being used politically, saying Liberals "are not motivated" by their proximity to power. He also pointed out that the Liberal party will continue its practice of paying for the food and booze, which will consist of hors d'oeuvres and Canadian wine.

"Donors to the Laurier Club are not motivated by that sort of thing. Access to the prime minister is something that is widely shared among Canadians -- donors and non-donors alike," said Mr. MacKinnon, noting Mr. Martin was accessible to Canadians of all walks of life during the recent 36-day election campaign.



CREDIT: Jonathan Hayward, The Canadian Press

Prime Minister Paul Martin will continue a tradition begun by his rival Jean Chretien by hosting a cocktail party at 24 Sussex Drive for individuals who have given at least \$1,000 to the Liberal Party.

"I don't think anyone expects influence in exchange for a donation to the Liberal party and certainly anyone who does would be quickly disabused of that notion."

Mr. MacKinnon added that hundreds of other Canadians are on the prime minister's guest list next week at 24 Sussex as well, including the national media.

Mr. Martin and his wife, Sheila, will host reporters at a garden party Monday evening, Liberal caucus members Tuesday, and Parliament Hill staffers Thursday.

In past years, Canada's corporate elite and top political lobbyists have flown in from across the country for the annual garden party at 24 Sussex Drive and this year is expected to be no different. In fact, Mr. Chretien was heard boasting a few years ago that some had paid up to \$3,000 to fly in from Vancouver to attend his soiree because they considered it such an honour.

The evening has been compared to former U.S. president Bill Clinton's practice of collecting party donations in exchange for sleepovers at the White House.

The Laurier Club was established by the party in 1986 and automatically grants membership to any Canadian who contributes \$1,000 or more to the Liberals.

Meanwhile, a survey released today shows the Liberals are having a hard time gaining Canadians' confidence.

The survey compiled by SES Research and sent in advance to CanWest News Service shows a country guarded about its support for the government, reluctant to denounce the Liberals but unwilling to give them clear support -- a picture that first came into focus in the June 28 election result.

Survey respondents gave the government average approval ratings in 11 policy areas, from health care to public safety, the environment to the economy, national defence to national unity.

"Canadians are very tentative about the Liberal government," SES president Nikita Nanos said this week. "There's not a lot for them to approve or disapprove of. So, it's really going to be incumbent on Paul Martin, especially leading a minority government, to put something in the window to drive these numbers."

The SES survey polled 1,000 adults Aug. 5-11.

On a scale of one to seven, the government's actions on public safety and security received the most approval: an overall rating of 4.4. The lowest mark -- 2.9 -- went to the Liberals' management of tax dollars.

"Considering he's a former finance minister, he's really got to turn that number around," Ms. Nanos said.

The aggregate SES results are considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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