

Martin says Liberals on comeback Warns of right-wing alternative

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TORONTO -- Prime Minister Paul Martin boldly predicted a Liberal victory in Monday's election while warning the alternative would be a Conservative government shifting Canada towards extreme right-wing U.S.-influenced ideology.

"Never have we seen a major political party with such a conservative agenda as this one," Martin said in Toronto, portraying Tory Leader Stephen Harper as an enemy of the courts who sees judges as preventing him from attaining absolute power.

Martin, who is trailing in the polls, also ramped up calls on NDP voters to switch their vote to the Liberals to stop Harper, a highly successful strategy in 2004.

"We are on the march, and we are marching towards a remarkable comeback," he said.

In his attack on Harper, the prime minister offered theories about what the Tories could do to the courts and individual rights if they form government -- another strategy the Liberals used successfully in the closing days of the 2004 election when the Conservatives appeared headed for victory.

Courts "stand between him and the most socially conservative social agenda that has ever been this close to forming a government. This is no abstract issue. We have a vacancy to be filled on the Supreme Court bench," he said.

Harper dismissed Martin's spin on the courts and abortion rights, saying he has no plans to overhaul the appointment of judges and that he believes the judiciary is independent.

"We will try our best to appoint people who understand the judicial temperament obviously with some wisdom and discretion to enforce and interpret the laws that Parliament passes," Harper said to repeated questions on the issue Thursday.

NDP Leader Jack Layton, campaigning in Victoria, called Harper's strategy of saying a Conservative majority government would be held in check by the courts and the Senate "bizarre."

"It hardly is an appeal for support from Canadians, to say 'don't worry, other people will hold me in check,'" he said.

Harper, who is concentrating on seats in Ontario and Quebec in the final days of the campaign, said his party has supplanted the Liberals as the defenders of national unity in Canada.



CREDIT: Canadian Press

Liberal Leader Paul Martin holds a stuffed bear he received as a gift during a stop at a campaign office in Belleville, Ont., Thursday, Jan. 19, 2006.

The Conservative leader said Martin has not done enough to distance himself from comments made by Canadian Auto Workers president Buzz Hargrove at a Liberal campaign event where the two appeared together Wednesday. Hargrove accused Harper of being a separatist and said Quebecers should vote for the Bloc Quebecois to stop the Conservatives.

"I don't care how much the Liberal party wants to stay in power, it is absolutely unacceptable to in any way, shape or form, suggest that people should vote for the breakup of this country in order for the Liberal government to maintain its entitlements of power," Harper said.

"The reality is only the Conservative party at the present time is gaining broad-based support across the country. Re-election of the current government would be a terrible signal to Quebecers and other Canadians that federalism is corrupt and can't be fixed."

Layton accused the Tories of being "cocky" in the final days of this campaign.

"I think you just get that sense ... that there's a certain sense of where their campaign is, and they're starting to show those signs," he said without elaborating.

Layton suggested Harper would bring in tax cut policies detrimental to working families.

Martin said Layton's call to be the rallying point for progressive voters would lead to success for the Conservatives.

"The message that I raised today very clearly is that if the progressive forces are going to come together then Jack Layton better get out of the way because, in fact, the progressive forces NDP, Green or undecided have got to support us."

Layton had a few sharp words of his own for Martin and his flagging Liberal campaign Thursday.

Preventing a repeat of 2004, when NDP supporters moved to the Liberal camp to thwart a Tory win, will be a top priority for Layton over the final days of the campaign, suggesting Canadians "won't make that same mistake."

"There's a sense in which the Liberals have taken their support for granted," he said. "That culture of entitlement has extended right down to taking people's votes for granted."

The campaign turned ugly in Saskatoon as Conservative MP Maurice Vellacott said he was defamed on air during an election forum on cable TV. A call -- later traced back to the campaign office of Liberal Chris Axworthy -- was made during the program and contained false allegations of sexual assault against a church worker.

"It's quite a jolt when I've served in public life over many years, I've served as a pastor ... I've served as a college teacher," Vellacott said. "My record is clear and clean like an open book."

In a press release issued late Thursday, Axworthy called the allegations deplorable and offered his heartfelt apologies to Vellacott.

Axworthy, a former Saskatchewan justice minister, also pointed to the heavy traffic around his campaign office and said it is possible that a "mischief-maker" entered the office and used one of its phones.

Axworthy vehemently denied putting anyone up to the task.

"Absolutely not," he said. "If any campaign was to do anything of this sort, would they be stupid enough to use their own phone numbers. It's nothing I condone. I would never support it under any circumstances at all."

The Liberals had another setback in Quebec Thursday when one of their candidates

conceded he does not stand a chance of winning Monday's election and thinks the Conservative candidate would be better for the region since he might make it into the Tory cabinet.

Liberal Gilles Savard told reporters his opponent, Jean-Pierre Blackburn, should be the next MP for the riding, currently held by the Bloc Quebecois.

"Listen, who are we kidding," Savard told a radio reporter. "It's certain I will not be the MP in place Monday. Jean Pierre is a good guy, un bon jack.

"In my mind, it's clear Mr. Blackburn should be the next MP. That's how I see it."

Savard made the remark when asked for his reaction to the news his chief organizer, Jean-Guy Boily, was now openly supporting Blackburn, a former MP for the riding under Brian Mulroney.

Savard said Boily made his own decision and that does not stop them from being friends. He said he personally still plans to vote Liberal Monday and wants his supporter to as well. He said he was staying in the race.

Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe also tried to raise concerns Harper may threaten French in Quebec.

In a spirited attack against the Conservative leader before a packed auditorium of students at the University of Montreal, Duceppe suggested Harper could facilitate the fight against Quebec's long-standing language laws.

"Mr. Harper has very clear opinions on French in Quebec," Duceppe told the boisterous crowd.

"I can tell you one thing, we will not let Stephen Harper attack Bill 101. Never will we accept that."

Quebec's Bill 101, protecting French language rights, has not been an issue in the campaign, even during two French-language debates.

Polls continue to show the Tories in range of a minority government, with a possibility of winning a majority -- or at least 155 seats -- on Monday.

National support for the Conservatives stands at 37 per cent with the Liberals at 30.7 per cent, according to the daily tracking for CPAC by SES Research.

The NDP is third at 16.6 per cent, the Bloc Quebecois tracks at 10.7 per cent nationally and the Green Party has 4.9 per cent.

"Battleground Ontario remains gripped in a tie with the Conservatives at 40 per cent and the Liberals at 39 per cent," said Nik Nanos, president of SES Research.

Harper leads Martin as the leader Canadians think would make the best prime minister by six points, according to the poll of 1,200 Canadians taken Jan 16-18 and said to be accurate 19 times out of 20.

With files from James Gordon (Ottawa Citizen)

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