

Canada's election not set but some push for spring

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By Randall Palmer

OTTAWA, April 27 (Reuters) - Many Canadian cabinet ministers are pushing for an election this spring, although Prime Minister Paul Martin announced no final decision at a dinner meeting on Monday night.

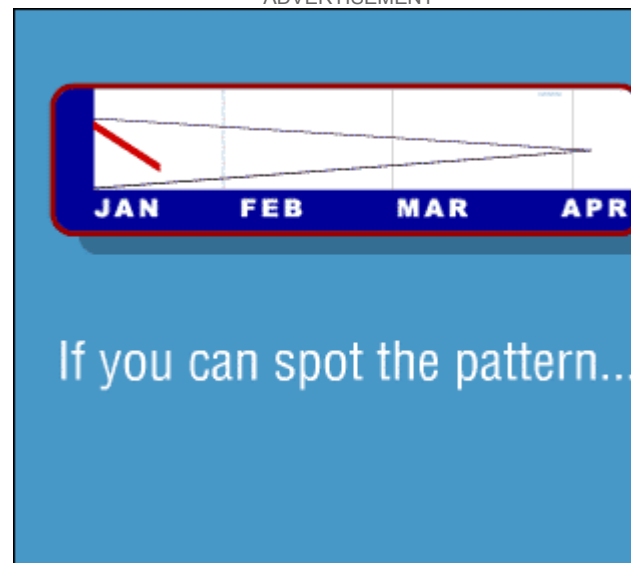
Ministers arriving for a cabinet meeting on Tuesday, the morning after the working dinner, were coy about what was discussed. But senior Ontario minister Joe Volpe told reporters no decision had been reached there on a date.

"It will be when the prime minister announces it," was the cryptic response of Martin spokesman Mario Lague.

Martin took over as prime minister in December and had initially wanted to call an election in April for a May vote.

But Liberal standings in opinion polls have been smacked by a scandal involving the misuse of government funds in a sponsorship campaign designed to fight Quebec separatism, and some in Quebec have urged caution about going to the voters.

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But many advisors, particularly in Liberal strongholds around Toronto, want Martin to tough it out on the assumption that he will gain in opinion polls during the campaign.

They might take solace from a poll released on Tuesday for the CPAC public affairs channel showing Liberal support at 40 percent for the first time in two months.

The poll of 1,000 Canadians, by the lesser-known firm SES Canada Research, put the Liberals 13 percentage points ahead of the opposition Conservative Party.

Forty percent is considered the minimum to win a majority in Parliament, although support as high as 41.7 percent on ballot day has led to minority governments in the past.

Other polls over the last two months have put Liberal support in the range of 35 to 39 percent, almost certain to translate into a minority government.

Another SES survey, for Sun Media, said only 33 percent of Canadians viewed Martin as the best choice for prime minister, down from 50 percent in February, and 60 percent disapproved of his handling of the advertising scandal.

The window for Martin to call a June election is closing rapidly, although he still could call an election on May 9 for a vote on June 14.

Otherwise, he is likely to wait until the autumn or next year. Constitutionally, he can wait until November 2005.

One of Martin's political foes, Warren Kinsella said in a Web posting that Martin would be defying history if he gained support during a campaign.

He pointed out that Martin's predecessor, Jean Chretien, had lost 12 percentage points in the 1997 election and nine points in the 2000 election.

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