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Ministers urge PM to call June election



Photo: Tom Hanson/CP

Prime Minister Paul Martin arrives at his residence, 24 Sussex Dr., to attend a dinner with his cabinet in Ottawa on Monday.

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Ottawa — The momentum for a spring election grew yesterday as several Liberal ministers went into a rare 24 Sussex Dr. supper meeting urging Prime Minister Paul Martin to go to the polls in June despite the qualms of some of their colleagues from Quebec.

They emerged 3 1/2 hours later, after what Health Minister Pierre Pettigrew described as "one of the best substantive political discussions that I have seen in my years in Ottawa."

Mr. Pettigrew, who gave a formal presentation on his 10-year plan to remedy the health-care system that he is developing with the provinces, played down any discussion on election timing. Instead, he said, the cabinet spoke about issues.

"We were talking about health care, regional development, the importance for the regions to feel good about the country," he told reporters outside the gates of the Prime Minister's residence. As he spoke, his cabinet colleagues rode away from the dinner in two green House of Commons buses. Mr. Pettigrew had his car.

Liberal insiders say that Mr. Martin is not expected to decide on election timing until after his meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush on Friday.

Martin aides said the Prime Minister is keeping his options open on whether to use the health-care strategy for an election platform for the spring or a governing agenda for the months ahead.

Last night's dinner was held with only the politicians and two aides from the Prime Minister's Office present: chief of staff Tim Murphy and principal secretary Francis Fox. The only other person present not in cabinet was PEI's de facto political minister, MP Shawn Murphy, who is expected to be named to Mr. Martin's next cabinet.

The fact that he was there signalled that there was political and election talk.

The cabinet is to meet again this morning in anticipation of Mr. Martin's visit to Washington.

Earlier yesterday, more than a dozen ministers trooped out of Question Period saying they were ready for an election, and some urged that one be called. "I could have gone a couple of weeks ago, and nothing has really changed my view on that," said Human Resources Minister Joe Volpe, the Ontario political minister.

"I think Canadians are looking forward to an opportunity to be able to say they want Paul Martin to run the next government of Canada."

He added: "I think that most of the MPs and ministers from my province — and I'm speaking only of my province from my role as minister — we are very confident."

Quebec ministers have been more reluctant because polls there show the Liberals trailing the Bloc Québécois, but some Quebec ministers also told reporters that they want to campaign now.

Heritage Minister Hélène Scherrer, an election campaign co-chair for the party, said she spent the weekend visiting several regions in Quebec and voters there told her that they, too, were ready for a spring election.

"From what I've heard in Quebec, we seem ready," she said. "My opinion is to go now."

Meanwhile, Mr. Martin's Quebec lieutenant, Jean Lapierre, denied a report in the Ottawa weekly The Hill Times that he had threatened not to run in a spring election. "It's total fabrication," he said. "I'm there whether it is now or in the fall."

Mr. Martin's aides insisted that last night's dinner meeting would not focus on election timing. They said the Prime Minister would likely seek opinions, but the timing of an election will not be decided by 40 people sitting around a table.

"Will the subject of election timing come up? For sure. I can't imagine that ministers won't voice a view. But he's not calling them together to do a straw vote on whether there ought to be an election. That's going to be his judgment and he's not going to sacrifice that judgment " one Martin aide said.

Instead, other Liberal insiders said, Mr. Martin is expected to meet party strategists after he returns from Washington and then decide whether to call a spring election. That call could come on May 9, because June 14 is viewed as the most likely date for a spring election.

Aides to Mr. Martin insisted, however, that last night's meeting would focus on the government's agenda — whether their message is to be used in governing or on the campaign trail. That would include canvassing for new ideas for the Liberal platform and priorities that should be completed before an election, insiders said.

Mr. Pettigrew was asked to make a presentation on health care — expected to be the Liberals' chief election theme — reiterating the policy he outlined in a Toronto speech last week and asking colleagues to help plot strategy for working out a deal with provincial premiers.

Mr. Martin was expected to go over the five broad policy priorities he has identified — health care, cities, wasteful spending, access to postsecondary education and Canada's role in the world — and ask them how their activities fit in.

"He will ask them about specific initiatives in their area, whether they touch on the five priorities or

whether they are potential legislative items and remind them that since we are not going to make a call for a little bit yet on whether or not we are going into an election that they should ready themselves and their department as though we are not," an aide to Mr. Martin said. The Liberal government is still fighting the fallout from the sponsorship scandal and hoping a slow bounce back in the polls will be topped by an election campaign where Mr. Martin outpaces Conservative Leader Stephen Harper.

Some Liberal strategists said they believe the party can win a majority with 40-per-cent support, just about where polls place it now.

A new poll conducted by Ottawa-based SES Research and released yesterday found the Liberals running at 40 per cent, the Tories at 27 per cent and the NDP at 17. It also found 60 per cent of Canadians were dissatisfied with Mr. Martin's handling of the sponsorship scandal and 50 per cent believe it is "time for a change" in government.



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