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Martin would be wise to factor the playoffs into his election formula

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Prime Minister Paul Martin may be on the verge of switching allegiance.

Not from one party to another, despite former prime minister Joe Clark's praise of him as "the devil you know" the other day, but from the one sport he does like to watch, football, to one he's never shown much interest in, hockey.

If, as is now widely expected, Martin does decide to drop his election writ within the coming days, he will not only want the Stanley Cup playoffs to go on as long into June as possible; he will be cheering, perhaps even *praying*, for a Canadian team to go as far as possible.

He could use the distraction.

The last possible day for a seventh game in the Stanley Cup final, according to the National Hockey League, is June 7.

It is, at the moment, theoretically possible that that night could see the Montreal Canadiens or the Toronto Maple Leafs playing the Calgary Flames -- although that possibility seems, at the moment, almost impossibly thin.

Still, imagine the choice: watching two Canadian teams battling for the first Stanley Cup to come home in more than a decade, or watching the returns dribble in from B.C. to decide an election that, Martin desperately hopes, will already have been decided long before the counts are completed on the West Coast.

It is a political rule of thumb in Canada that lack of interest helps incumbents. In a land where the people traditionally take far more delight in tossing out than turning in, an awakened public can be a dangerous thing. Just check the most recent results in British Columbia, Quebec, Ontario, Newfoundland . . .

June 7 is a possible date for Paul Martin's election, but given that he may wish to be at the Group of Eight summit the next day -- "G8" being international political code for "excellent photo opportunities" -- it is likely he would wait until June 14.

Even so, the three remaining Canadian teams continuing through the playoffs would deflect a lot of attention away from such grisly matters as the sponsorship scandal. It would also deny the all-important "face time" to the devil Clark says we don't know, Stephen Harper.

This, then, would explain why those reporters hovering outside Monday evening's cabinet dinner kept hearing shouts of "Go Habs Go!" "Go Leafs Go!" and "Go Flames Go!" from inside 24 Sussex Dr.

Martin should, however, also give consideration to the more likely hockey outcome: all three

Canadian teams bowing out shortly.

If Martin thinks this country is in a cranky mood today, just wait. A particularly nasty winter would have been followed by a foul spring, and Canadians might like nothing better than to take a few licks at the ones they blame for everything anyway: politicians.

A poll this week by SES Research puts Martin's Liberals at 40 per cent, an eight-point drop in three months, followed by Harper's Conservatives at 27 per cent, the NDP at 17 per cent and the Bloc Québécois at 12 per cent.

What is far more interesting is SES's finding that 50 per cent of the country is in the mood for change.

You begin to see why SES president Nikita Nanos would suggest on CPAC the other night that Martin's best election strategy at this point might be to flip a coin. Canadians are unfairly stereotyped as predictable.

B.C. policy expert Tex Enemark, a long-time Liberal organizer and onetime candidate against Tory Kim Campbell in 1988, has a theory about Canadian political history. Rule No. 1 is that nothing ever works out the way everybody thinks it will work out; the unexpected is, really, the norm.

To illustrate his point, Enemark lists a half-century of electoral surprises, beginning in 1955 when Fisheries Minister James Sinclair foolishly told a newspaper reporter that the Liberals were so solid about the country that come the next election they could win with aging Louis St. Laurent "if we have to run him stuffed." St. Laurent lived to run, but lost to John Diefenbaker, even though Maclean's magazine had already gone to press editorializing about the next four years of Liberal rule.

Enemark says that, from personal experience, he would never have predicted either Pierre Trudeau or Clark would one day be prime minister when he first met them. He also points to such surprises as Clark's 1982 resignation to force a leadership contest when he had the support of two-thirds of the party, Jean Charest quitting the federal Conservatives to become a provincial Liberal, Clark's return to lead his party, only to declare that party dead and throw his endorsement this week behind the . . . Liberals.

The unexpected, you see, is really the norm.

"As my old boss [Trudeau cabinet minister] Ron Basford used to say," Enemark says from his office in Vancouver, " 'Everybody in public life is only one sentence from political oblivion.' "

In other words, whatever happens will make sense only in retrospect.

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