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TODAY'S PAPER
NATIONAL

Party with most seats will govern, Martin says

Conservatives won't make power deal for Bloc, NDP support, Harper repeats

By CAMPBELL CLARK, BRIAN LAGHI
Thursday, June 24, 2004 - Page A4

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WINNIPEG and TORONTO -- Paul Martin shut down talk that he might try to form a minority government even if his party places second in Monday's election, saying it is "common sense" that the party with the most seats will take office.

One day after the Liberal Leader suggested it is not always the first-place party that gets the first chance to form a minority government, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper went on the attack, insisting the Liberals "will do anything to stay in power."

Mr. Martin was already reining in the issue by making it clear he will not remain prime minister if his party does not tally more MPs than Mr. Harper's Tories. He said he did not like to speculate, but added: "It's a common-sense proposition that the party that has the most seats is the party that certainly ought to form the government."

While a Martin aide insisted the Liberals would not "clutch and grab" at power, Mr. Martin opened the door on Tuesday to the idea of trying to remain in office with fewer seats than the Tories. When asked if the party with the most seats should always have the first chance to form a minority government, Mr. Martin said "that depends on the circumstances."

"We've all seen combinations and permutations where these things have happened differently."

Just as Mr. Martin changed tack, Mr. Harper went on the attack, saying the Liberals are obsessed with staying in government and would try to cobble together a minority with other opposition parties if they finish second.

"I think, as I've predicted myself, that the Liberal Party will do anything to stay in power," Mr. Harper said. "They will cut any deal. The platform they are running on is meaningless."

"What we know about politicians who will cut any deal is that they cannot be believed and what we

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Unfortunately, due to CRTC regulations, Michael Moore's new film Fahrenheit 911 will be released in Canada as Celsius 488. Ed Wheeler

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know is when you cannot believe a politician, your health care gets worse and your taxes go up."

Under Canadian constitutional convention, the governor-general usually asks the sitting prime minister first whether he can form a government, and even a prime minister with fewer seats can attempt to hold office if he can assert he could win the support of a majority of MPs in the House of Commons. Although the prime minister is expected to give way if he is far behind, there is no hard-and-fast rule for what result would dictate a transfer of government.

Mr. Harper repeated that he would not make a deal with the Bloc Québécois or the New Democratic Party should the Conservatives win the most seats.

However, his House Leader, John Reynolds, told The Globe and Mail in the second week of the campaign that his party would work with the Bloc Québécois to defeat the Liberals if the Liberals get a razor-thin edge in seats.

"If the Liberals win one more seat than us and the Bloc and us defeat the government, it would be obvious what the next step would be," Mr. Reynolds said recently. "It would be irresponsible to hold another election right away."

While Mr. Harper suggested Mr. Martin lacks principle, Mr. Martin delivered broad attacks on Mr. Harper's fitness to be a national leader. He unleashed what appeared to be a thinly veiled blast at Mr. Harper for failing to apologize for the Conservative press release with the headline "Paul Martin Supports Child Pornography?"

"A true leader, a person who would aspire to lead a nation, a prime minister, understands that the true test of character comes not during the triumph, but during the hard times. In having the courage to admit to mistakes, to failures," Mr. Martin said in Edmonton.

"In having the resolve to not only endure the criticism, but to recognize it, to respect it. In having the simple sense to apologize. In the unyielding commitment to take the necessary steps to make amends and prevent a reoccurrence."

Mr. Martin also charged that the Conservative platform shows Mr. Harper is willing to push the country into deficit, while his support for provincial autonomy and cutting the size of government means that he would shrink the role of the national government. "Mr. Harper does not believe in a strong national government," he said. "I don't think he'd deny that."

The attacks are apparently aimed at fuelling doubts about Mr. Harper's suitability to be prime minister. An SES Research rolling poll has seen Mr. Harper's rating on the question of who would make the best prime minister plummet in the past week. He is now the choice of 20 per cent of respondents, nine points behind Mr. Martin.

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