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Politics

June 21, 2004

Going, Going...

Paul Martin's campaign has gone off the rails. JOHN GEDDES reports on the Liberal party's desperate last-ditch plan to get back on track.

JOHN GEDDES

IT'S NOT AS IF Paul Martin hasn't had *any* good days on the campaign trail. There was his stop in Saskatoon way back on May 31, when polls still showed his Liberals ahead of Stephen Harper's Conservatives. On that occasion, he dazzled students at Holy Cross High School in a freewheeling discussion on anything they cared to ask him about. Media onlookers and Martin's own handlers agreed he was in the zone. Canadians with good memories might recall a similar vintage Martin performance in a CBC TV town hall on Feb. 4, when Peter Mansbridge could still introduce him as "a popular prime minister, and his party has overwhelming support." Six days later, that description was suddenly rendered obsolete, with the auditor general's scorching report on the sponsorship affair. Martin has never really recovered.



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Liberals cling to the hope that the Martin who can seem so at ease in front

of the right sort of audience will reappear before it's too late. They need voters to see him at his informal best, not as the strained politician he has looked like through so much of this race. But even if Martin's gift for easygoing give-and-take could be showcased between now and the June 28 vote, it might not be enough. Desperate Liberal strategists have decided on a far more hard-hitting approach. David Herle, Martin's top adviser and his campaign co-chairman, told Liberal MPs last week that the party must resort to a negative advertising offensive in a bid to halt its downward spiral. Harper responded with typical calm disdain. "I will let the Liberals descend into the gutter," he said, "and they will be punished accordingly."

That's the risk they take. The history of going negative in Canadian politics is checkered at best. The best-known example: a Conservative TV ad mocking Jean Chrétien's appearance in 1993, which backfired badly. Rod Love, co-chairman of the Conservative campaign in Alberta and a legendary partisan tactician, says many less notorious attempts have also failed. "Canadians just don't respond to that kind of stuff," Love notes. "I've never seen it succeed in the many campaigns I've worked on." There are exceptions, such as the caustic Tory TV spots that undermined John Turner's credibility in the 1988 free-trade election. Liberals produced TV ads attacking Kim Campbell in 1993 and Stockwell Day in 2000 -- but never used them. This time, though, they are under far more pressure. Martin's people defend their approach as a legitimate bid to expose Harper's real ideas, not a personal assault. "This is about fundamental policies on human rights, foreign policy and economic management," said Liberal strategist John Duffy.

Liberals see Harper as particularly vulnerable on three main fronts:

- On Iraq, they say he would have sent Canadians to war. Harper insists he only advocated lending moral support to George W. Bush's "coalition of the willing," since Canada simply didn't have enough soldiers available to do any fighting. But that awkward line -- for the war, but not for fighting -- is hardly one of Harper's stronger debating points. Frank Graves, president of the polling firm Ekos Research Associates, says this is a potential big winner for the Liberals, both because the vast majority of Canadians think staying out of Iraq was the right choice, and because Harper's stance sounds dodgy.
- On hot-button social issues, they portray Harper as retrograde. He has left the door open to using the Charter of Rights and Freedoms' so-called notwithstanding clause to override any Supreme Court of Canada ruling in favour of same-sex marriage. And since Canadians tend to hold the Charter sacred, Liberals believe Harper is on the wrong side of opinion. On abortion, though, he may be less exposed. Harper vows not to introduce anti-abortion legislation, so Liberals can only attack him for saying he would not block his MPs from trying to pass private members' bills on the issue. And getting any private member's bill voted into law is extremely difficult.
- On spending, they accuse Harper of hiding his intention to slash programs. His platform is a \$90-billion mix of tax cuts, defence and health spending, and debt repayment. That blueprint assumes the cost of existing programs will grow by just three per cent a year. Liberals say 4.5 per cent growth is more realistic. That's a big difference: about \$10 billion a year. So Liberals charge that Harper means to cut that much to make room for his new priorities. A debate over numbers can be painfully dry, but Martin could score points if he can sow suspicion that Harper isn't coming clean on his

real plans.

But Liberals can't win a policy battle if Martin doesn't communicate more compellingly. While there have been fleeting high points, such as his give-and-take with the teenagers, they have been far too few. More often, voters have been treated to Martin in his arid business-symposium mode. Not much better are his occasional flights of old-style rhetoric, such as when he shouted "Onward to victory!" without a trace of irony on the first day of the campaign -- a reminder that he's a 66-year-old who learned about campaigning at his father's side in the 1960s, back before TV demanded cool.

Harper, 44, has proved he's good at keeping the temperature down. That's now his big challenge: staying icy calm as Martin's crew tries to steam up the contest. Some Liberals are apprehensive about how Martin will maintain a prime-ministerial aura in such a clash. Doug Richardson, a long-time Martin supporter and veteran Liberal organizer in Saskatoon, said a few days of "tough stuff" leading up to the June 14-15 debates should be enough to draw a clearer line between the two parties. "Then I'd have him take the high road in the debates," Richardson said. "After that, in the last two weeks, I'd do nothing but put him in settings like the one at Holy Cross High School."

Other Liberals share his view that showing off Martin's casual, engaging side is essential. "No matter what else is going on, people don't dislike Paul Martin," says Toronto MP John Godfrey. "I think he's disappointed them somehow. But when you ask, 'Who looks more like a leader to you, Martin or Harper?' they say, 'Well, Martin.' " That may be particularly true of women. Nikita James Nanos, president of the polling firm SES Canada Research, which is tracking voter opinion shifts nightly for the CPAC TV network, said the Liberal push on issues such as abortion has begun to make it harder for Harper to win over women voters. "Looks like women may have a significant impact on who wins," Nanos said last week. In an apparent reaction, the Conservatives began running a TV ad featuring Harper with his wife and children -- a feel-good family-man pitch designed to counterbalance his less female-friendly neo-conservative side.

Liberals are also targeting left-leaning NDP and Bloc Québécois supporters who might be alarmed by Harper's rise. When Martin returned to Canada after attending the D-Day 60th anniversary ceremonies on France's Normandy coast and then the G8 Summit on Sea Island, Ga., his first stops were in Montreal. "When Quebecers have a choice between helping the Alliance-Conservatives by voting for the Bloc, or voting for a party that will truly represent them, I'm sure they will vote for the Liberal party," Martin said. In parts of Ontario and the West, particularly Saskatchewan and Manitoba, organizers claimed they were detecting signs of NDP voters strategically switching to the Liberals to deny Harper victory.

Liberals are counting on an awful lot of pieces quickly falling into place. Jolt opinion with a round of tough ads, consolidate the women's vote, drag back some worried NDP and Bloc converts -- and somehow cobble together enough seats for a minority. It's hard to see it working, though, unless Martin loosens up. But that's not where the Liberal campaign seems to be heading. Is it possible to attack and relax at the same time? Martin might have to pull off that trick -- to pull this election out of the fire.