

Campaign decoder

Liberals are liking current situations that display Martin at odds with Bush

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OTTAWA—Liberals say there was no deliberate attempt to drag Canada-U.S. relations into the federal election at the end of this week.

But they're not displeased either about what they call the "coincidental" convergence of events that all displayed Prime Minister Paul Martin at odds with U.S. President George W. Bush.

The handgun-ban announcement in Toronto, the appearance yesterday with former U.S. president Bill Clinton, the slap at the United States during the Montreal climate-change conference — all helped Martin show that he was no friend of the current White House administration or the more right-wing U.S. culture overall.

As well, the news this week that the U.S. was reducing softwood-lumber duties was quickly spun by Liberals as proof that their tough talk on free trade had paid off. Like children, Americans can't vote in this election, but that doesn't mean they're not a big part of the campaign.

EKOS polling firm president Frank Graves says it makes sense for Liberals to try to ride on current anti-U.S. sentiment in Canada, specifically because it appeals to the party's prime demographic targets: small-l liberals, well-educated Canadians and youth. These are people who might be tempted to vote for the NDP, especially in the key Liberal battlegrounds of Ontario and British Columbia.

Martin's cultivation of the anti-U.S. vote this week, then, has to be seen in the same vein as his public courting of Canadian Auto Workers president Buzz Hargrove last week.

If Martin can't get a majority, he needs the NDP to prop him up more officially than in the last Parliament. So this is an appeal with an eye to before and after the Jan. 23 vote — a strategy and a contingency plan, all in one.

"Certainly there is a clear political rationale for doing so and I think they may well be exploiting this opportunity," Graves says, adding: "And it may be a factor in their current success."

One senior strategist for Martin did admit off the record this week that it was far easier during an election campaign than when in government to tackle issues such as gun control.

The strategist didn't say this, but it's easy to read between the lines: It's far easier to antagonize constituencies in Alberta and rural Canada, where Liberal hopes are dim, when you're speaking as a partisan instead of as a prime minister.

Had the government still been standing, in other words, it's far from clear that Martin would be so pointed in his bid to carve out a position so provocatively challenging to the U.S. and Conservative

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constituencies in Canada.

New Democrats, however, believe the strategy is too obvious by half.

"There's little new in Liberals campaigning from the left," says NDP strategist Jamey Heath. "They've rarely done anything but. But 12 years says they don't mean it."

So how does the NDP intend to respond? "(We'll) point to the facts, which make our case quite well: You have little reason to believe a thing the Liberals say," says Heath. "You know they can't be trusted. (They) can't be trusted on promises or ethics."

Conservatives also realize that Liberals are using the Canada-U.S. issue with an eye to drawing sharp distinctions with them.

Like the NDP, they believe it's too obvious a strategy. That doesn't mean it doesn't work, though, Conservative strategist Goldy Hyder says, candidly.

"Yes, of course it's strategic and while it may win elections, does it actually advance the country's and therefore the people's interests?" Hyder says.

The Tories' only response, he said, would be to take the high road. "It's high time that we define ourselves — and our public policy positions — by who we are and what we believe as opposed to who we are not and what we don't believe," Hyder says. "Don't expect the Conservatives to take the bait."

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