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Province still key to Liberal victory

As governments have found, Ontario's voters shouldn't be taken for granted

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Ontario is Paul Martin's redoubt. Now that an election has been called, it is all that stands between the Prime Minister and potential humiliation.

In the West, voters — angered by the so-called sponsorship scandal — are drawing away from Martin and his Liberals.

Quebec, while more fluid, still presents a challenge to the governing party as the separatist Bloc Québécois struggles to stay in play. Atlantic Canada simply doesn't have enough voters to decisively determine the outcome of the June 28 vote.

Without a solid success in Canada's most populous province, the Liberals are almost certain to be reduced to minority government status — or worse.

Can they do it?

Technically, the polls are encouraging for them. A Star-EKOS poll shows the Liberals at 47 per cent in Ontario. Ipsos-Reid has them at 49.

But as other governments have discovered — usually to their peril — Ontario voters should never be taken for granted. Cross-cut by regional divisions, the province is far more complicated than the rest of the country believes.

For the past 15 years, Ontario provincial politics has resembled a merry-go-round, with voters electing one of the three major parties after the other, and then unceremoniously turfing them.

Federally, Ontario appears more stable. For 11 years, the federal Liberals have monopolized the province. When Parliament was dissolved yesterday, the Liberals held 95 of Ontario's then-103 Commons seats.

But appearances can be misleading. In significant ways, this hammerlock on power is a mirage, created by the collapse of the old Progressive Conservative party and the subsequent rivalries between it and the upstart Reform (later Canadian Alliance) party.

Now that the Conservatives and Canadian Alliance have merged, conventional wisdom holds that the Liberals could lose at least 15 of Ontario's now- 106 ridings to their right-wing counterpart.

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But it is quite possible — even likely — that the Martin Liberals will do far worse.

Some Liberals predict privately that their party, under attack by both Stephen Harper's Conservatives and Jack Layton's New Democrats, could lose up to 45 seats in Ontario, thereby denying Martin a majority government.

Other Liberals say they could lose even more seats.

The reasons given are many. Most cover the usual ground, including the sponsorship scandal as well as voter disillusionment with a government that has been in power so long.

However, in conversations with Liberals, two things stand out.

The first is the state of disarray of the party itself. Martin's attacks on his predecessor, Jean Chrétien, coupled with what many Liberals see as a deliberate vendetta against those not on his team, have created an almost unprecedented degree of bitterness within the party.

At Liberal events, party members who dislike Martin go out of their way to buttonhole journalists.

"I can't stand him," one Liberal stalwart volunteered during an event at which the Prime Minister was scheduled to speak. "He's too right wing, too indecisive.

"I don't think of this as my party any more."

For a party that prides itself on its disciplined approach to power, this kind of unsolicited comment — on the eve of an election campaign — is highly unusual.

The second imponderable for the Liberals is Martin himself.

As finance minister, he seemed golden — poised, confident, fully in command.

Since becoming prime minister, however, the sheen has gone.

His first five months in the job he coveted for so long have been — if not disastrous — lacking.

True, the sponsorship scandal bequeathed to him by Chrétien did not help.

But Martin's own performance has been lacklustre. Those close to the centre say the Prime Minister and his team have barely been able to cope.

Take the sponsorship scandal — the allegation that Liberal government attempts to foster pro-Canada feeling in Quebec ended up wasting tens of millions of public dollars.

The main elements of this affair were well-known a year ago. On top of this, Martin received Auditor-General Sheila Fraser's latest damning report a good two weeks before it was made public.

Yet even so, the issue seemed to take Martin by surprise. Not until the last minute did the Prime Minister and his panicked team lay down a political strategy for responding to the scandal.

Many argue that even that strategy, which featured Martin jetting around the country apologizing — all the while disassociating himself from the government he served for so many years — may have made the politics of the situation even worse for the Liberals.

Others say he had no choice. In any case, Martin's apology tour quickly degenerated into what can only be called a period of frenetic inactivity, as the Prime Minister travelled from riding to riding — talking, promising, insisting he was governing the country, denying he was campaigning and talking some more.

"He talks too much," says one Liberal, a veteran of many campaigns. "He should learn to say less."

Martin's misfortunes shouldn't be exaggerated. An EKOS poll done for the Star earlier this month found that Martin was still deemed the best choice as prime minister by 23 per cent of Canadians — compared with 10 per cent for Harper and 3 per cent for Layton.

More troubling for the Liberals, though, was another EKOS finding. The number of Canadians who think the government is moving in the wrong direction (46 per cent) now exceeds by a significant margin those who believe it's on the right track (39 per cent).

That's almost the reverse of the situation last summer when Chrétien was prime minister and Martin his heir apparent.

Still, Ontario seems to be sticking by Martin, according to the polls.

EKOS says the province is bucking the national trend with almost half of those polled saying they still think the federal government is moving in the right direction.

When Ipsos-Reid surveyed the country last week, it found a similar anomaly. Across Canada, 60 per cent of those polled said it was time for a new federal government. But in Ontario, the figures were more evenly split, with 43 per cent saying the Liberals deserve another chance.

That's the good news for Martin.

'He's too right wing, too indecisive. I don't think of this as my party any more'

A Liberal, talking about Paul Martin

The bad news is that none of this may mean very much.

If the past 20 years have taught anything, it is that — in Ontario at least — pre-election polls should be treated with extreme caution.

When then-premier David Peterson called a provincial election in 1990, his Liberal government was riding at more than 50 per cent in the public opinion polls. Peterson lost.

When the 1995 provincial election was called, Lyn McLeod's Liberals were again running high in the polls. They lost, too.

The provincial Conservatives had the polling edge on the Dalton McGuinty's Liberals when Ernie Eves called an election last year. The Tories lost.

Throughout the country, the dynamics of the election campaign itself have become crucial. But this seems particularly true in Ontario.

Large numbers of Ontario voters appear to pay absolutely no attention to politics until forced to by the campaign itself. Ask them what they think ahead of time and they are liable to hem and haw.

If forced to comment on who should be prime minister or premier, a great many will choose the incumbent — usually because they have no idea who the leader of the main opposition party is.

When pressed as to how they are going to vote, Ontarians tend to say Liberal. But it often turns out that this answer has little to do with real voting intentions and much to do with giving what they believe to be an acceptably polite answer to an intrusive question.

Conventional wisdom holds that Ontario's tendency to vote one way provincially and the other federally is a deliberate strategy to hedge the province's bets.

But anyone who talks to Ontarians about politics quickly realizes that strategic voting is the furthest thing from most voters' minds and that, indeed, many get provincial and federal issues — as well as parties — hopelessly mixed up.

All of this is preamble to stating that until the campaign is underway in earnest, no one can predict how the bulk of Ontarians will vote.

Or, to put it another way, the outcome in this province will depend, in large part, on which party or leader makes the most unforgivable gaffes during the next month.

Still, it's possible to sketch out some of the preliminary contours of the Ontario campaign.

First, anyone who hopes to make an informed choice on the basis of party policy is almost certain to be disappointed.

Martin (who, ironically, is known as something of a policy wonk) has been impossibly vague about where he intends to take the country if the Liberals are re-elected.

For his part, Harper (another policy aficionado) has chosen to be strategically circumspect, fearing that if speaks too bluntly about his views, the Liberals will be able to paint him as a neo-conservative madman.

Indeed, beyond a few bromides agreed upon when the two right-wing parties merged, the new Conservatives don't even have official policies. The party was cobbled together so quickly that no one had time to develop any.

The New Democrats are usually policy-heavy. But since he became leader, Layton has concentrated his efforts on winning media attention.

Early indications are that he'll downplay party policy and focus on slagging Martin in an attempt to

bleed off left-Liberal voters.

Second, the Liberals are almost sure to lose seats to the Conservatives (who at dissolution held just four Ontario ridings).

The most obvious evidence of this is an electoral map showing the results of the last provincial election.

Much of it is coloured Liberal red. But a solid band of blue bisects the province — 24 Tory ridings that stretch from the flatlands of Lake Erie up to Georgian Bay, through the 905 suburbs flanking Toronto and over to the hardscrabble farms and piney woods of the Ottawa Valley.

Unless Harper flubs badly, that band of blue should be the basis for a resurgence in Ontario of the newly united Conservative party.

"We ran an almost flawless campaign," reminisces one Liberal, speaking of McGuinty's triumph in last year's provincial contest. "More by luck than design maybe, but it was almost flawless. Ernie Eves ran one of the worst campaigns in recent memory. And they still got 24 seats.

"What does this mean for Martin? I think it means they could lose."

Countering this, however, is a third reality. The Conservatives, while united in name, remain divided in reality.

Former prime minister Joe Clark's recent attack on Harper was not just the isolated rumbling of a long-time antagonist. Clark spoke for many Progressive Conservatives who are uneasy about Harper and suspicious of his intentions.

A few months ago, many of these people would have almost certainly, if quietly, cast their votes for Martin, the only real progressive conservative remaining on the political landscape.

Now, however, matters are far less clear. The more Martin talks, the worse he looks. The less Harper says, the more acceptable he seems.

Fourth, the NDP remains a wild card. These days, New Democrats tend to be discounted. Since 1988, they've won only two seats in Ontario. But the left-liberal voters upon whom the NDP used to depend have not disappeared.

Some were drawn to the old Reform party by its populism. Many more voted Liberal simply to forestall something worse.

In 1993, Ontario NDP voters supported the Liberals in order to punish the Tories of Brian Mulroney (who, ironically, was no longer prime minister by then).

In 1997, NDP voters went Liberal to keep Preston Manning's Reform party out of government. In 2000, they voted Liberal again in an attempt to deny power to the Canadian Alliance's Stockwell Day.

This time, Martin hopes to spook left-liberal voters again by demonizing Harper as the enemy of medicare. If he succeeds, the NDP might yet again face a near-shutout in Ontario.

But if Harper manages to avoid being typecast, New Democrats have a good chance of taking seats in Ottawa (where former party leader Ed Broadbent is running), Layton's own Toronto and in Hamilton — in addition to their current Windsor stronghold.

Indeed, Hamilton promises to be particularly interesting given the bad blood between Martin and Sheila Copps, the long-time Liberal MP from the city who was, in effect, bounced from her seat by the Prime Minister and his allies.

That caused considerable dismay among leftish Liberals who saw Copps' ouster as part of an ideological purge. It also threw the Liberals in her east-end Hamilton riding into considerable confusion.

Ironically, the first casualty of this Martin-Copps feud may have been McGuinty. His Ontario Liberals were soundly trounced by the NDP last week in a by-election played out in what was, more or less, the provincial version of Copps' old riding.

While there were many factors at play in that contest that had nothing to do with Martin or Copps, it seems clear that the disarray in the federal Liberal party did play a role.

Some Liberals worry that this disarray will only get worse as the federal election date approaches.

"I can't remember a time when the Liberal party was going into a campaign with as much internal tension as now," says one long-time Liberal insider ruefully.

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