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Playing the `Martin card' a desperate ploy: Pollster

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OTTAWA—Premier Ernie Eves' surprising decision to repeatedly praise Paul Martin — a federal politician and a Liberal — during the Ontario election debate was widely seen yesterday as a desperation gambit that can only hurt the prime minister-in-waiting.

Eves, who trails Ontario Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty in the polls, shocked political observers by saying six times in Tuesday's debate that Martin "gets it" that tax cuts promote economic growth.

In contrast, the Ontario Premier insisted, both McGuinty and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien "just don't get it."

Most observers saw the move as an attempt by the struggling Eves campaign to link the Premier to the popular Martin. "Everybody realizes that the man of the hour, the guy with the best numbers in the country, is Martin," said Liberal pollster Michael Marzolini. "So, if you can say you are like Paul Martin in any way, that may do you a bit of good in politics."

With voting day only a week away, Eves' decision to play the Martin card was "a desperate ploy" to revive the Tory campaign, said Frank Graves of the polling firm EKOS Research Associates Inc.

Graves said this kind of publicity from an arch-conservative like Eves could be a problem. "It's potentially damaging to Martin in the upcoming election," Graves said.

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