

# PAUL MARTIN'S MOMENT OF CHOICE — LIBERAL OPPORTUNISM OR REFORM LIBERALISM

Tom Kent

The Martin Liberals may now suffer heavy losses in the early election they had planned. To delay, however, is also dangerous. Their own troops may be further demoralized, while the new Conservative Party will certainly be enlivened by the possibility of power. The government could nevertheless gain by devoting some months to action instead of electioneering and waging war on Jean Chrétien. It would need a limited, focused program producing benefits that people promptly feel. The question for political strategists is whether Paul Martin is capable of winning credibility as that kind of reforming prime minister. Probably he is not, but possibly he is.

Les libéraux de Paul Martin risquent maintenant d'essayer de lourdes pertes lors du scrutin anticipé qu'ils ont planifié. Mais il serait tout aussi risqué de retarder l'échéance. La démoralisation pourrait encore s'accroître dans leurs rangs, et le nouveau Parti conservateur gagnerait sûrement en dynamisme à l'idée de prendre le pouvoir. Le gouvernement pourrait cependant miser sur un délai de quelques mois pour passer à l'action au lieu de faire campagne ou de guerroyer contre Jean Chrétien. En lançant par exemple un programme d'ambition limitée qui produirait des résultats tangibles. Il reste aux stratèges politiques à déterminer si Paul Martin sera crédible en premier ministre réformateur. Sans doute pas, même s'il est sans doute plus réformateur qu'on le croit.

**W**hether Paul Martin hangs on to the prime ministership he so much wanted depends on whether he can persuade more Canadians to see him as he tries to see himself: as a reformer. He has not begun well. He is unlikely to do better if he sticks to the early election he intended.

The purpose of this article is to suggest what kind of things should be done if the government now decides to govern for much of the year before putting its fate to the test of a general election. Martin's talk has been mostly about making Ottawa more democratic. That is indeed important for the longer run, but what is presently significant is that many voters can now feel, for the first time in years, that a vote for a candidate who is not a Liberal may make an immediate difference to government. Many of those votes will stay Liberal only if the government itself does things that make a visible difference for people now. Ottawa should revert to the responsible role in health care that Martin so disastrously destroyed nine years ago. Taxes should be cut on lower

incomes instead of higher incomes. Effective policy will focus on just a few such key actions, based on re-thinking what can best be done in a new political situation.

Martin was apparently persuaded, by numerous spinners reinforcing his self-judgement, that his reputation as minister of finance was almost enough to ensure an easy victory in a spring election. It needed the support only of fine rhetoric, provided he also distanced himself from his predecessor. In the leadership manifesto Martin gave to his party, the nearest thing to a definite commitment was that he would somehow lessen "the command-and-control systems of central authority" with which Chrétien was famously identified in Ottawa.

Whether that would have been sufficient we will never know. In the early aftermath of the sponsorship scandal the Martin government has looked, to put it kindly, disorganized and untested. Fewer people will now take it on trust. To earn their confidence will require more than a few weeks in office.



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Paul Martin could suffer heavy losses in a spring election, but could still rise to the challenge of governing by delaying the election, staying in Parliament and charting a true Liberal course for the country. Absent a policy purpose, governance becomes strictly about power, and “unchallenged power always corrupts,” writes Tom Kent, who, as senior policy adviser to Prime Minister Pearson, was an architect of Canada’s modern day social programs.

A few months of governing, before a fall election, might make the difference. But postponement would also be a high-risk strategy. Its success would require a different Paul Martin from the one we have seen since he left the shelter of the Chrétien government and openly concentrated on his campaign for leadership. He has been all things not only to almost all people but to almost all causes. Martin’s rhetoric of reform was, and has remained since he became prime minister, miles wide and not an inch deep. That is not the way to counter a public disposition to throw the rascals out at last. It is not the way to impress the electorate with a sense of public purpose. For that, a politician needs specific objectives with which people can identify, an agenda of realistic action that will soon make a difference.

There may be hope of a different Paul Martin. There was one. Liberals seeking hope should look back to 1988, when he entered Parliament. Then it was the opposition to the left of the government that was divided. John Turner’s eloquent campaign against the allegedly free trade agreement had failed because a minority of the public vote was enough to give the Mulroney government a parliamentary majority. In the aftermath Paul Martin made his first bid for leadership. He then treated the Liberal Party in opposition as what a democratic political party should be: an association of people who cooperate to develop and promote ways to implement the concerns about public policy that, in part at least, they share. The Martin campaign of 1990 challenged his party with some radical policy ideas, particularly his “Liberal vision” for the environment.

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People with long memories must see, in the contrast between 1990 and 2003, a kind of similarity with the senior Paul Martin a generation before. He too when young was a man of ideas, of ambition with public purpose. But by the 1960s, when the government to which he belonged was indeed reforming Canada, he had become what then seemed to be the epitome of noncommittal political caution. The second Martin’s transition has been even greater. The Liberal convention of 2003 will be noted in history because rarely, if

ever, has a changeover in any party in any democracy been made with so little discussion of purpose, with policy so complete a vacuum. The one contribution with content had to be provided by a rock star.

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It is therefore understandable that Mr. Martin sees a need for democratic reform and accountability. As yet his specific promise is to give backbench MPs more freedom on committees and in voting. That will be good for the hundred-odd Liberal members not enlisted in the present monstrous administration. It is a meritorious triviality among all the democratic reforms that are needed and Mr. Martin could easily make. He could start at the centre of the "command-and-control" he rightly criticised in his predecessor; he could slash the staff in his own office. He could restore the collective responsibility which is at the root of accountability in government by halving the size of his Cabinet. He could remove the administrative duties by which he is distorting the role of parliamentary secretaries and confusing responsibilities. He could much improve efficiency by making the Privy Council Office a great deal smaller.

Even more fundamental reforms could be made within weeks. The basis of prime ministerial domination over Parliament is the authority to dissolve it when he chooses. Simple legislation could establish a regular four-year term, subject to

shortening only by the votes of majorities of at least two of the parliamentary parties.

Martin recently said that he favoured reform of the Senate and would talk to the provinces about it.

That is a prescription for inaction. Reform could be started at once by the prime minister abandoning his patronage appointments and instead filling Senate vacancies by elections.

It would also be easy to abandon patronage in hundreds of other appointments that the prime minister controls. The qualifications of a proposed appointee could be submitted in writing to a parliamentary committee. If a number of MPs thought the qualifications dubious, the appropriate minister or his representative would be summoned before the committee to explain. The government

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would thereby be shamed out of even suggesting appointments of a blatantly patronage kind; and parliamentary committees would gain a significant additional function.

Two major democratic reforms are more difficult. The first is internal to the Liberal party, to make it again an association to discuss and promote public policies. Some of the causes for its loss of that purpose go back a long way and were equally at work in the

old Progressive Conservative party. The magnified Liberal deterioration over the past ten years is attributable more to circumstances than to persons. The rise of Reform and the Bloc destroyed effective opposition.

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and with that participation and accountability dissolve. Nothing is more important for liberalism than the undoing of that damage, but it is not a project that will contribute much to saving the Martin government this spring or fall.

The other major reform is also for the future, though perhaps the early future. It is electoral reform. It is the replacement of first-past-the post winners by proportional representation, aligning strengths in Parliament with opinion in the country. No leader who owes a majority to the present system can be expected to change it willingly.

Reform will come if it is insisted on by a party holding the balance of power when a government has lost its majority. This year perhaps?

There is also a difficulty about democratic reform that is personal to the prime minister. It means that, far from distancing himself in all respects from his predecessor, he must embrace Jean Chrétien's principal legacy, his last-minute cleansing

of political finance. That legislation removed the worst of all the previous offences to our political democracy. Martin's main activity of recent times, the collection of over \$12 mil-

in action. Easy things will not be enough. For all its importance in the long run, closing the democratic deficit will not win many crosses on this year's ballots. The reforms that

most directly relieved by making the increased allowance a refundable credit. The loss of revenue could be made good by cancelling the regressive tax cuts for richer people scheduled in previous budgets.

That would be hardly enough for an agenda clearly marking the prime minister's emergence as an effective reformer. The further priority could be an increase in the child bene-

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lion of mostly corporate money in his support, thereby became an activity that is now illegal. He dared not oppose the legislation but could hardly speak in its favour at the time. Now he must swallow and digest. Unless he puts beyond doubt his agreement with the democratization of political finance, unless he commits the Martin government to maintaining and fully enforcing the Chrétien law, his claim to democratic liberalism will lose all credibility. But if he is large-minded enough to be fully open in now acknowledging identity with Mr. Chrétien on this issue, not only will his own role as a political reformer be firmer; he would be better able to handle a spring election, if that should remain his strategic choice.

Whether it does will presumably depend in large part on how well the new Conservative party gets its act together when its leader is chosen. Before the release of the auditor general's report on February 10, Mr. Martin had a good deal of right-wing sentiment on his side. There may be more to lose if the Conservatives come out of their turmoil united behind a leader who demonstrates skills both in argument and in organization. In that case delaying the election will benefit the government only if the time can be used to gain more support on the left than leaks away on the right.

That possibility depends on Martin's ability to become a reformer

will count are those that directly affect peoples' lives now.

Martin has good reason for his recent emphasis on health care. Its deterioration over the past nine years was set in motion by his 1995 budget. That not only made savage cuts in immediate funding. Worse, it ended federal commitment to future funding, substituting an arbitrary transfer that Ottawa can vary as it decides. The intent was clearly to go on reducing it. In practice the public pressures have been too strong for that, but they have resulted only in uncertain recovery through federal-provincial conflict.

If Martin is wiser now he will make convincing restitution for his past error. His present words will be reflected not in protracted talk with the provinces but in the print of immediate legislation that restores

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federal commitment to a firm share of health care costs. He will follow that by concentrating on just a few other priorities where early action will produce early results.

The strongest candidate is a start to reform of the tax system by raising the basic allowance for personal income tax. That would benefit everyone. The worst of poverty would be

fit, which Martin has the credit of starting. An appropriate accompaniment would be a convincing start on framing policy for early childhood development. The practicable agenda for reform before a fall election would then be full. All the vaguer items in Martin's "politics of achievement" could be left to compete for places in an election platform.

It is not easy to draw expectations of effective reform from Mr. Martin's recent past, from the nature of his campaign for leadership, from the organization of his staff and selection of his Cabinet, from his early policy pronouncements, from the apparent panic in which he responded to the Auditor General's report with haste to point the direction of blame. But optimists will recall the younger Paul Martin. In politics people as well as circumstances can change quickly, lessons are sometimes promptly learned, attitudes turned,

policies reversed. Perhaps Martin has the capacity for four years of power with purpose for Canada.

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