

Martin's swearing-in will reveal his intentions



In just a few days, Paul Martin will become Canada's 21st prime minister. With neither an election nor a robust leadership race to give definition to the shape of the soon-to-be-installed Martin government, the Dec. 12 swearing-in ceremony will finally put an end to the speculation about Mr. Martin's agenda for change, which has been creating a buzz in and around Ottawa for many months.

For those interested in the likely

style and character of the Martin government, watch for a number of announcements during the swearing-in ceremony at Government House that should serve as an indicator of future direction. A government's first 100 days in office — and especially its performance in its first few weeks in office — often prove that first impressions really do count. Experience has taught us that an error-filled or disorganized start usually leads to problems in governing. Just ask Bob Rae or Brian Mulroney, both of whom spent a considerable amount of their political capital trying to catch up after faltering starts. So, the first thing to look for is how quickly and smoothly the new government appears ready to govern.

Since Paul Martin won the leadership last month, his transition team has been confronted with a myriad of decisions that will ultimately define his prime ministership. Paramount in

their thinking is how large a cabinet Mr. Martin should create.

The size of cabinet revolves around a number of key issues.

First, while Mr. Martin has not yet revealed his policy priorities for the nation, his cabinet should dovetail with the initiatives that he wants to kick-start before the next general election. Thus, the names of the departmental portfolios and their structure should go a long way to revealing his priorities.

Second, given his preoccupation with the role of the backbench MP, the way in which the cabinet system institutionalizes backbenchers, parliamentary secretaries, committee chairs and caucus leaders will send a strong and precise signal as to whether and to what degree power will be genuinely shared among his caucus colleagues.

Third is how Mr. Martin will handle the decision-making process in government. In 1993, Jean Chrétien streamlined the cabinet committee system in order to delegate power and to keep debate to a minimum. His view was that once MPs are appointed to cabinet they soon lose their objectivity and become advocates of their departments, thus making it hard for them to make the difficult tradeoffs that characterize government decision-making.

As a result, he strongly preferred streamlined decision-making, leaving the tough decisions for the minister of finance and himself.

In her recent book, *Juggernaut*, the *Toronto Star's* Susan Delacourt describes Paul Martin's fascination with policy debates, and how he often seeks out diverse points of view from among his wide range of friends and acquaintances. This penchant for debate is an especially interesting characteristic, since it will challenge Mr. Martin's advisers to find a decision-making system that allows for the kind of discussion he loves, but also ensures that decisions are taken in a timely and explicit manner.

Next is how the new prime minister wants to relate to the federal public service. Paul Martin knows the value of Canada's public service, since he enjoyed excellent relations with his departmental officials during his nine-year tenure as minister of Finance. However, over the past few years the public service has been under attack for a number of management-related problems that have centred on misuse of public funds by officials, overspending on controversial programs and suggestions of declining policy expertise.

Many of these problems have been dealt with and there is much promise

for better administration as a result of the recently passed Public Service Modernization Act. But Mr. Martin has promised change, and the easiest way to signal change (without necessarily changing outcomes) is to shuffle officials and to make appointments from the outside. Will change trump expertise or will Mr. Martin choose a "steady as she goes" approach?

Finally, the size and distribution of responsibilities within the Prime Minister's Office will be a strong indicator of how much change we will see. So far, Mr. Martin has announced that his PMO will retain some of the characteristics of Pierre Trudeau's PMO, with two individuals sharing the administrative and political responsibilities at the top.

It will be interesting to see whether the regional desks (especially those in western Canada) receive more responsibility, and whether the appointments secretariat (a sore point with many "democratic deficit" watchers) is overhauled in order to allow for more caucus and public input.

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