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Liberals' flickering fortunes depend on Martin

Party wasn't careful what it wished for

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Liberals threw the country into this election in the hope Paul Martin would be the issue. Now, that wish has been granted with a perversity that could easily cost the party power.

No matter how the public opinion numbers are cut, combined, sliced or diced, the campaign that began Sunday is now set to end in a referendum on the Prime Minister and his capacity to govern. An election that was his to lose, is now one only he can win for a party slumping in the polls and clearly struggling to regain traction.

In the four weeks remaining before June 28, Martin must reconnect with fickle, angry voters, illuminate a vision for Canada's future that has lost its focus, and, most important, dispel rising doubts about his leadership.

It's an imposing task, one that collides with history and overwhelming evidence that Canadians are demanding more change than they believe a party in power for 11 years will deliver. Ruling parties rarely gain strength during elections and Liberal chances of bucking tradition are reduced by a scandal left by Jean Chrétien and by the Martin administration's disappointing performance.

Lumped together with the damage inflicted on federal Liberals by Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty's clumsy budget, those factors threaten to end the party's string of consecutive majorities at three. More stunning still, that looming reversal raises the spectre that Martin, who, just months ago, was expected to sweep the country, might now become opposition leader and, in time, little more than a political curiosity.

Apart from rock-solid support in Atlantic Canada and slightly improved prospects in Quebec, the EKOS Research poll commissioned by the Star finds only doom and gloom for the Liberals. Ontario, the province Chrétien swept often and easily, is actively reconsidering its options, Liberal support is dangerously soft and both national opposition parties are making gains at the ruling party's expense.

If this continues, British Columbia will determine the difference between victory and defeat, majority or minority, sometime late on election night.

How dramatic is this change? As EKOS president Frank Graves puts it, the shift in political plates is so significant that the probability of Martin capturing another Liberal majority are about the same as Stephen Harper forming a Conservative government.

Or, look at it this way: If an election were held tomorrow, only the foolhardy or partisans blinded by loyalty would bet on anything other than the first minority in 25 years.

That's a result most voters welcome. Unwilling to reward Liberal abuses and wary of a Conservative

party that may still secretly harbour an Alliance agenda, a majority of Canadians are looking for protection in the discipline and consensual policies that determine how long minorities survive

But it's far, far too early to predict this election's outcome. With the leaders' debate still two weeks away, with only about half those who say they will vote firmly fixed on a party, only uncertainty is certain.

For opposition parties that just months ago expected to be steamrolled by the Martin juggernaut, that is very good news.

It signals that for the first time since 1988 they are in a race where they could finish high on the podium. That's particularly true for the reconstituted Conservatives. Harper's success in bringing together social conservatives and Tories who were more like Liberals is now mirrored across the country.

It is again the alternative and the stick voters can use to beat Liberals.

The NDP is also much better positioned to catch votes falling away from the centre of a political spectrum that in recent years has drifted right. As long as it can recover from leader Jack Layton's shaky past few days, the NDP is now poised to play spoiler and, perhaps, to hold the balance of power in a fissured Parliament.

With holes appearing in the big tent it erected over federal politics, the ruling party is trying to woo those voters back to what it defines as the moderate middle. Swinging through Western Canada this week, Martin noticeably toughened his rhetoric, saying the country could not afford what he called violent swings between the far left and the far right.

That was the most tangible manifestation of Liberal concern over the rising challenge to the ruling party's hegemony. Otherwise, Martin insiders are reacting with studied calm to the party's grim new situation.

Much of that is simply bravado. Political strategists pay at least as much attention to trends as to numbers and those revealed by the EKOS poll are heading in the wrong direction.

As Graves says: "A minority Liberal government would seem to be an optimistic conclusion for Paul Martin, given the trajectory of current forces."

Liberal insiders have known about that trajectory and those forces for some time. All that differs is their analysis and the optimism in their conclusion. In all the darkness, they find glimmers of hope. Of those, the brightest is still Martin.

Troubles notwithstanding, Martin remains the party leader voters believe is best able to lead the country. That not only plays to the Liberal strategy of making this election about Martin, it positions the party to take advantage of another consensus EKOS identified.

Canadians believe this election is important and that it is about the country. Martin is hammering that point home on his coast-to-coast sprint this week and is certain to repeat it with metronomic consistency.

Along with telling small and partisan audiences that they must choose between defining social programs and the low-tax regime Harper promises, Martin is asking Canadians to spend more time thinking about Canada.

It's vague and overtly cuddly, and it echoes the badly flawed 1972 Pierre Trudeau campaign that proclaimed "The land is strong" and left Liberals with a weak minority. But EKOS found it resonates with voters more concerned about shared values than about tax breaks.

To turn this election around, Martin must sketch his outline for Canada's future and then boldly paint between the lines with compelling public policy. Here in the Alberta capital, Martin did just that by adding detail to his plans for Canada's cities, promising to provide predictable, stable, long-term funding.

That's vital for the big cities that need much more help to be both liveable and economically competitive. And it's equally important for the Liberal vote in the five metro centres where most Canadians — and most party supporters — live.

But the policy that now matters most to Liberals is the one unveiled in Cobourg Tuesday. Not only is health care the country's overarching issue and Martin's top priority, it's the only available antidote for the virus McGuinty's broken-promise budget spread to the federal Liberal campaign.

In the political equivalent of jiu-jitsu, Liberals will try to use Ontario anger over broken promises to throw voters to Martin's solutions for those same health-care problems McGuinty is raising taxes to fix. It's a long shot but it's also the best shot for federal Liberals trying to avoid being mortally wounded by voters targeting the party's provincial cousins.

It's indicative of the depth of Liberal problems that they are looking so hard for anything that might miraculously make coal look like gold. Parties that successfully mine the vein of broad support know they don't need alchemy to win.

What Liberals need now is for Canadians to think again about this election. They need them to think of the risks of what seemed like a safe protest vote until Martin fell off his pedestal. If they do, Martin's team is outwardly confident that an unsettled electorate will again tilt toward the Liberals and their leader.

Real or just a reaction to adversity, that confidence got a significant boost at week's end. After smooth starts, Harper and Layton both hit major bumps that at least temporarily knocked their campaigns off track.

Martin quickly capitalized, using Harper's bilingualism bungle to flag what he called a "hidden agenda" and Layton's foolish remarks about homelessness to dismiss the NDP leader.

Damaging in themselves, those mistakes also gave Martin a much-needed respite. Instead of flailing at those he's trying to demonize — a low political strategy that isn't working well — Martin is momentarily enjoying the luxury of counterpunching from the political high ground.

If nothing else, that gives Liberals time to regroup and find the energy missing from the campaign's first week. But it won't be nearly enough.

Sooner, not later, Martin must find the magic that last year made him the country's most popular politician. He must distance himself from an inherited scandal and he must prove that his fumbling start in power was an aberration, not a glimpse of the future.

A politician who thrives on ideas and believes government is part of the solution must, for a second time, make converts of Canadians who are suddenly inclined to simply throw the bums out.

Most of all, the Prime Minister must earn the public trust that comes before a renewed mandate. That makes Paul Martin the issue and puts this election squarely in his hands.

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