

Campaign of two themes [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stability versus change. This will be the defining theme of the election campaign.

Strip away all the promised trinkets and baubles that will be thrown at voters from leaders on the hustings, and only one thing will matter: are Canadians so tired of the governing Liberals after 12 years in office that they are ready to take a chance on the alternative - Stephen Harper's Conservatives.

Within minutes of the campaign launch Tuesday, as the party leaders showcased the main messages that will buttress their drive for votes, it became clear the oldest dynamic in politics - old versus new - will likely be the main ballot-box question on Jan. 23.

Jack Layton's New Democrats will try to plant another thought in voters' minds: Parliament needs a strong NDP contingent to keep the next government honest. Gilles Duceppe's Bloc Quebecois, citing the sponsorship scandal, will appeal to Quebecers' pride to punish the Liberals.

But make no mistake, the central battle of this campaign will be between just two men - Harper and Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin. One of them will emerge from the fight as the country's next prime minister. Voters seeking a clue of what to expect over the next 55 days need look no further than their opening volleys Tuesday.

Martin emerged from Government House to read a prepared address designed to remind voters of three things:

Martin boasted of his government successes since the last election & a health-care deal with the provinces; agreements with the provinces to improve child care; and further accords with most provinces to invest federal money to renew cities.

Still, this likely isn't enough to prevent the Liberal vote from bleeding, since most people haven't seen the effects of those initiatives in their lives.

Thus, Martin has already begun to focus most of his self-praise on the Liberals' economic management. The idea is to appeal to voters' pocketbooks, persuading them their chances of benefiting from low interest rates and tax cuts - even hanging on to their jobs - are better if the Liberals stay in power.

"Under a Liberal government, Canada has gone from pauper to powerhouse," he said.

Less than a half hour later, Harper emerged from the open doors of the House of Commons to read a carefully crafted statement. It was designed to strike a chord with the many Canadians who are disenchanted with Liberal rule, but who have not yet made the leap of faith towards the Conservatives.

"For Canadians seeking accountability, the question is clear: which party can deliver the change of government that's needed to bring political accountability to Ottawa. We need to change government to replace the old-style politics with sweeping reforms."

Change. It was a word Harper used 18 times during his prepared statement.

Change in health care, in honest government, in taxation, in crime prevention, in child care, in seniors' pensions, in federal- provincial relations. The list went on and on. The Liberals will spread "lies" and "fear" about the Conservative agenda, said Harper.

As usual, it will be a battle for the hearts and minds of voters. But more than ever, the election could very well hinge on what Canadians feel in their gut - what feels right - when they cast their vote.

- reprinted from the Western Star (Corner Brook, NFLD and Lab.)

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