

PM slams rivals for forcing vote [CA] ^[1]

Author: Whittington, Les

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Paul Martin launched his campaign for re-election by charging that his opponents are putting their own political ambitions ahead of Canadians' interests.

"A minority Parliament means the opposition can force an election whenever it chooses. In this case, I believe ambition has overwhelmed common sense," he said yesterday after announcing the Jan. 23 election.

"They have decided that forcing an election now is more important than establishing benchmarks to reduce waiting times in health care, more important than making sure Canadians receive the full benefits of the tax cuts announced by the finance minister."

Touching on the overarching theme of the Liberal campaign, Martin stressed his government's success in balancing Ottawa's books, managing the economy, keeping interest rates low for borrowers and paying down some of the country's \$499-billion national debt.

"Eight straight surpluses; \$60 billion less debt; 400,000 new jobs," Martin declared. "I'm proud of these numbers and you'll hear me talk about them throughout this campaign."

But he said the important thing is what these numbers mean to average people "Today it is easier for Canadians to find work, to pay the bills, to afford a home."

The Liberal leader drew a contrast between his party's ideals for Canadian society and those of his opponents.

"I want that society to be progressive and generous, concerned not only with economic prosperity but with fairness and social justice."

He argued that Conservative Leader Stephen Harper would "turn his back on our investments in early learning, in cities and communities, in helping immigrants adapt to their new lives in Canada."

And at a boisterous rally for Ottawa-area Liberal candidates last night, Martin said Harper "doesn't want to talk about the issues that matter most to Canadians - health care, child care, the environment."

The Liberal leader previewed his approach to the campaign by declaring the battle between his party and the Tories is "about a fundamental clash of values."

Martin said, "I want to move Canada forward, not backward. I believe in a Canada that values and protects publicly funded health-care systems so that health care requires a health card and not a credit card."

The New Democrats, Martin added, would put the government's hard-won financial stability at risk by overspending on government programs while Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe's "one imperative" is to divide Canadians.

And Martin wondered aloud how Layton could demand action to shore up health care and then ally his party with the Tories, whom the Liberals maintain would undercut medicare.

In a replay of a favourite flourish from the 2004 campaign, Martin ran through a list of actions by his government to fulfill earlier pledges on social, defence and economic issues, chanting "Promise Made, Promise Kept" in unison with the audience of Liberal organizers and campaign workers.

- Reprinted from the Toronto Star

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