

An action plan for Paul Martin [CA] ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

After his hard-fought election win, a chastened Prime Minister Paul Martin promised the country that he and the Liberal party got the message loud and clear from voters that "Canadians expected and expect more from us, and as a government we must do better."

Martin was right to also promise that his government will do better. He might have been wise to add the words "We had better do better."

Bluntly, Martin and the Liberals will lose the faith of Canadians - many of whom voted reluctantly for them Monday - if they fail to formulate new policies to bolster our weakened social programs, rescue our crumbling cities, improve our environment, and stimulate jobs.

The vote also was an indication of how fed up Canadians are with the Liberal party, which has dominated national politics for much of the past 50 years because it was seen as the champion of social reform and national unity. Its dramatic fall from majority government status was in part because it had lost its voice and direction on these key issues.

Having campaigned on a promise of decisive action on a number of fronts, Martin must start delivering as soon as his new cabinet is sworn in. He cannot afford to delay until he presents a long-winded throne speech that merely repeats his election commitments, nor does he dare to make next year's budget an excuse for further indecision.

The first thing Martin must do is hammer out a new 10-year deal on health care with the provincial premiers, whom he meets later this summer.

Second, there is nothing to stop Martin from moving just as quickly on his commitments to cities. Having pledged them a share of the gas tax, he needs now to announce the criteria for determining how much each city gets, and the timetable for dispersing the money.

Third, Martin should move quickly on his pledges on child care and affordable housing. He should open a dialogue with the provinces on the shape of these programs and the appropriate sharing of costs.

Although governments typically prefer to stagger their initiatives so as to avoid agenda overload, Martin's main spending promises are relatively straightforward. He should be able to manage them simultaneously without putting his government under any undue strain. Not only would he show Canadians his determination to make up for lost time, he could demonstrate that his skills are as effective when it comes to building as they evidently were for slashing back in his days as minister of finance.

Accomplishing all of this should only be a start for Martin. That's because Martin, conservative and cautious by nature, must bring the party back to its roots as a bold, progressive party striving for social reform.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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