

Sheila Copps book scorches Martin record on Iraq, medicare, CBC

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OTTAWA (CP) - Sheila Copps's scorching new portrayal of Paul Martin suggests he would have had Canadian soldiers fighting in Iraq while he was undermining medicare and the CBC at home.

The former cabinet minister, who resolutely stayed in an unwinnable race for the Liberal leadership against Martin last year, has written a new book that depicts the prime minister as a sneaky, self-aggrandizing hypocrite who sabotaged his cabinet colleagues.

And a brief foreword by former prime minister Jean Chretien falls just short of an endorsement of her accusations.

Chretien describes Copps as "an old friend" and "a true Liberal" and lauds her outspokenness.

Some of her attacks are profoundly personal. She admits her "deep animosity" for Martin, calling him a "business Liberal" who betrayed the party's core, centrist values.

Worth Fighting For is bound to deepen the cleavages in the Liberal party, which opened during Martin's decade-long bid to supplant Chretien.

"I have always admired her dedicated hard work and her loyalty," Chretien writes, in what could be seen as a veiled jab at Martin's disloyalty.

A close associate of the former prime minister said he hadn't read the book before writing the foreword. In an interview, Copps said Chretien was simply doing her a favour and cautioned against reading any more than that into his foreword.

Copps, rumoured to still harbour leadership ambitions, acknowledged in the interview that she risks burning all her bridges to the party with her tell-all approach.

And she acknowledged critics might dismiss the book as sour grapes from a woman still fuming over losing the Liberal nomination in her Hamilton riding last March to Tony Valeri, an ardent Martin supporter and now government House leader.

She said she thought twice about being so blunt but decided: "For the Liberal party's long-term health, I think some of the issues that I've talked about in the book have to be tackled."

"If this would be the nail in my (political) coffin, then it's a nail well-placed because I would not want to be back in politics in the Liberal party unless the party makes a conscious decision to clean up (its act)," she said.



Some of Sheila Copps' attacks are profoundly personal. She admits her "deep animosity" for Martin, calling him a "business Liberal" who betrayed the party's core, centrist values. (CP/Jonathan Hayward)

Still, Copps, who contested the leadership in 1990 as well as 2003, hedged when asked if she'd ever consider a third run for the helm of the party.

"I don't really want to rule anything out in the future but it's certainly not on my short-term horizon," she said.

In the book, Copps says Martin's "first aim" as finance minister, starting from the moment Chretien took power in 1993, was "to make sure his eventual coronation would not be threatened by any potential upstarts."

She accuses him of using his position to consolidate his frontrunner status, rewarding supporters and undermining rivals. For instance, she says one Atlantic MP told her "he had promised to support Paul Martin . . . in return for getting a road in his riding paved."

She accuses "anonymous sources in the Finance Department" of strategically leaking stories to the media designed to portray Martin as "a frugal, wise administrator" and his potential rivals as "spendthrift."

Spending cuts were the product of difficult decisions by a committee of cabinet, but Martin "managed to convince the Canadian public that he was solely responsible for the health of the country's balance sheet."

Copps writes that Martin repeatedly took positions in private that were contrary to his public pronouncements.

At various times, Copps says Martin opposed pay equity and advocated doing away with regional economic development funds and old-age pensions, hiking the retirement age to 67 and privatizing the CBC.

Copps also alleges that Martin proposed, in a draft of his 1995 budget, to eliminate the Canada Health Act which underpins Canada's system of universal medicare. A spokesman for Martin has denied the claim.

Although Martin "liked to pose" as "the great defender" of CBC during last spring's election, Copps recalls meeting once with Martin to discuss the impact of spending cuts on her department, Canadian Heritage.

Out of the blue, she says he told her: "If you want to raise money by privatizing the CBC, I'd have no problem with that."

Although Martin was out of cabinet by the time the U.S. was planning to invade Iraq and made few public comments on the issue, Copps asserts that his real views were betrayed by the fact that the most vocal proponents of the war in Liberal caucus were his key leadership supporters.

Among them was David Pratt, who went on to become Martin's defence minister before losing his seat in last June's election.

"There is no doubt in my mind that if Paul Martin had been the leader, we would have gone to Iraq with the United States."

But Copps saves her most stinging criticism for Martin's conduct in last year's leadership contest and his subsequent treatment of her, the only rival candidate to stay in the race to the bitter end.

Recounting the rigging of membership rules and the "gerrymandered" voting system, she concludes: "All this stuff wasn't just the usual nomination shenanigans between excited organizers. It was widespread, organized fraud, directed from the top down."

She maintains similar dirty tricks were employed to ensure Valeri's victory in the subsequent nomination battle.

Copps concludes the book by insisting she is still a Liberal, albeit one who is "waiting for the real values of our party to re-emerge" and warning that Martin hasn't heard the last from her.

"As a spectator, I'll be watching with great interest and making my opinions known."

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