

Martin takes shots at Liberals

Front-runner tells a town-hall meeting he would bring new energy, enthusiasm and a new sense of purpose to the office of the PM if chosen to replace Jean Chretien

Mark Kennedy

CanWest News Service

MONTREAL -- In a blistering critique of his own government, Paul Martin has accused Prime Minister Jean Chretien's Liberals of losing their focus in governing the nation -- particularly in key areas such as foreign policy and health care.

Martin made the charge, the strongest criticism he has levelled so far at Chretien, during a town-hall style event organized Sunday by his team as part of his drive to win the leadership in November.

The undisputed front-runner in the race began the 90-minute question-and-answer event -- attended by about 100 average Canadians chosen at random by a pollster -- with a strongly-worded speech about how he would lead a much more active government than the one now led by Chretien.

"I am very proud of what we have accomplished in the past decade as a government," said the former finance minister who left cabinet last June when leadership tensions with Chretien boiled over.

"But in recent times a kind of complacency -- a certain drift -- has set in. We've lost some of the great energy and enthusiasm that Canadians are looking for. In my view, new times require new approaches."

Martin said that if Liberals choose him to replace Chretien, who is known for his cautious, managerial approach to governing, he would adopt a proactive stance on a variety of issues such as economic development, foreign affairs, higher education and health care.

"At a time like ours, we cannot afford to simply muddle through or manage along," said Martin.

"I want to lead a new government with a renewed sense of purpose and a sharper focus and a clearer plan. A government unafraid to change, a government that is eager to turn the page and a government that wants to look to the future."

Martin cited Canada's approach to foreign affairs and a key shortcoming in the recent federal-provincial health accord as two examples of where the government is adrift.

On health, he complimented Chretien and the premiers for striking a deal on Feb. 5 that pumps billions of dollars more into medicare and provides for greater accountability on how the money is spent. But he said the deal is silent on the one thing that matters most to Canadians: lengthy waiting lists.

Martin therefore indicated that if he becomes prime minister, he would negotiate with the provinces the development of a maximum waiting time for certain treatments. Under that plan, if a patient did not get the care they were guaranteed within the specified time, they could go to another province and get it there, at the cost of their resident province.

"The problem with the health-care discussion, the last agreement, is they didn't deal with the



Former finance minister Paul Martin made some unprecedented criticism of his own government -- faulting the Liberals' handling of foreign policy and health care -- at a town-hall meeting attended by 100 randomly selected Canadians yesterday.

fundamental measurable issue, which is how long is it going to take me to see a specialist if I have cancer? How long is it going to take to see a surgeon if I have a hip operation?"

On foreign affairs, Martin walked a fine line.

"We must ensure Canada's place in the world as one of great influence and pride. That means coming to grips with a world where our closest friend and nearest neighbour -- the United States -- has emerged as the lone super power. The partnership between our two nations, which is not based only on commerce, but on shared values, has been strained recently and we all know it. For the benefit of both our countries, we must work to confirm and strengthen our longstanding partnership."

Martin emphatically said the federal government took the right decision by not joining the U.S. administration in sending military forces to the Iraq war.

But he took pains to add that the government mishandled how that decision was communicated -- a move that led to a fiery public complaint from U.S. ambassador Paul Cellucci.

"I think the decision that we took on Iraq was the right one. However, I think we should have put it into context. And that context is that we are on the front lines in the fight against terrorism, that we are not going to back off that fight and that we are prepared to do whatever is required.

"I think we also should have made it very clear our very deep friendship with the Americans, with the Brits and with the Australians."

Martin said Canadians should realize the terrorism attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 "changed America's outlook forever" and the security of the common border and the entire continent is now crucial. Some critics have expressed concern that Martin is predisposed to joining with the U.S. in military projects such as the missile-defence program. Martin did not seek to dispel those suspicions Sunday.

"I have heard it argued that Americans are preoccupied with physical security while Canadians are preoccupied with economic security. I believe the distinction is false. There is no real choice to be made. Canada must be prepared to act in our national self-interest. To do that, we have to advance the mutual objective of a safe and secure North America."

Martin also said Canada should adopt a more pro-active approach multilaterally, bringing together the European nations and the U.S. that are now divided, and helping devise the future role of the United Nations.

The town hall was one of several to be held by the Martin campaign.

At the event, Martin faced a wide range of questions, from foreign affairs to seniors' pensions to social housing. Among the highlights:

- Martin said he would not cut the GST, saying he thinks it's better to reduce tax levels by slashing income taxes.
- He said he would not amend the Clarity Act, which sets out the terms of Quebec separation, to mollify nationalists in that province.
- He would decriminalize possession of small amounts of marijuana, so that offenders just get a fine instead of a criminal record.

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