



## MPs must have more power in Parliament: Martin



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Liberal leadership hopeful Paul Martin says Parliament should be overhauled to counter a "democratic deficit" that has steadily reduced the power of MPs and placed too much power in the Prime Minister's Office.

In his first major policy statement since being ousted from cabinet last June following a bitter leadership feud with Prime Minister Jean Chretien, the former finance minister proposed six changes to reform the House of Commons.

"We have to face the fact that something is going wrong here," Martin said in a speech at York University in Toronto. "(Parliament) is trapped in a morass of mindless adversarialism."

Martin says federal power is so concentrated in the executive that Canadians have lost touch with the political process. He says key decisions often come down to: "Who do you know in the PMO."

Martin's six proposals would:

- Loosen the hold on party members by adopting the British "three-line" whip system whereby MPs would be allowed more leeway to vote independently on bills that don't deal with government confidence. Martin calls the current system "government by coercion;
- Send more bills to committee after second reading to stimulate more non-partisan debate and speed their passage;
- Allow more private members' bills to be introduced and voted on in the House. Currently, only 10 bills based on a lottery are introduced and few ever become law;
- More independent Parliamentary committees to debate issues;
- A new process whereby Parliamentary committees would debate and approve government appointments;
- An independent ethics commissioner who would report directly to Parliament.

Martin, who is seen as the frontrunner to replace Jean Chretien when the prime minister retires in February, 2004, said most MPs continue to make a remarkable contribution "but do so in spite of the system."

He pointed to recent drops in voter participation rates to prove the "increasing disengagement of the Canadian population" in the political process.

"We must restore the connection Canadians share with Parliament."

Martin says his proposals are not overambitious and says it wouldn't be any more difficult than the "fiscal deficit" that the Liberal government eliminated in the nine years he served as finance minister.

Martin was criticized during the summer "barbecue" campaign circuit for being vague on issues such as health care and the environment.



He told CTV's Lloyd Robertson the debate over the Kyoto accord is a good example of why Parliament needs to be reformed.

"I've said all along that you can't go ahead without a plan," he said, adding that the government's action on Kyoto is another example of "top-down" governance. "You can't have a situation where these fundamental decisions are simply imposed."

Martin says polls show that democratic rights "rank right at the very top of Canadians' concerns when looking at the quality of life."

Opposition leader Stephen Harper called Martin's speech a "shtick" designed to win leadership support among Liberal backbenchers.

"But, it's nice to see that someone in the government supports democratic reform," Harper said after question period. "We'll hold his feet to the fire to see if it's actually done."

In a sign the Alliance clearly considers Martin the person most likely to succeed Chretien, the party [posted a rebuttal](#) to Martin's speech on its web site.

### **Liberal leadership campaign**

Martin is the only Liberal leadership contender actively campaigning to replace Chretien. Other expected candidates are currently serving as federal ministers and were told by the prime minister last spring to stop campaigning or risk expulsion from cabinet.

However, Chretien is expected to lift the ban on campaigning once the date and location of the Liberal leadership convention is confirmed and as soon as ground rules for campaign fundraising are resolved within the party.

Liberal Party president Stephen LeDrew told CTV's Question Period on Sunday the ban should be lifted before January.

Martin said he wants a "dynamic" leadership campaign with "a lot of candidates."

"I am already campaigning and I would like to have others out there to debate issues," Martin told reporters after his speech.

Current ministers Allan Rock, John Manley, Sheila Copps and Herb Dhaliwal are all considered possible candidates for the party's leadership.

According to a recent campaign filing, Martin has collected more than \$100,000 toward his Liberal leadership campaign.

However, because Martin is not a member of cabinet, he is not required to disclose all of his recent donations. There is speculation he will quickly gather hundreds of thousands more once the leadership race becomes official.

Rock's war chest totals more than \$400,000 in direct donations and another \$700,000 through his Toronto riding association.

Manley listed \$171,000, including \$96,000 from his Ottawa riding association, while Copps has reported \$54,000 in her leadership coffers.

Both Chretien and Martin spent more than \$2 million when they finished one-two respectively in the last Liberal leadership race in 1990.

LeDrew said the convention will almost certainly be held the week of Nov. 10, 2003, with the final vote coming on Nov. 15. Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver are vying to hold the convention.