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A LIBERAL SOLOMON NEEDED

Paul Martin's two roles, Prime Minister and party leader, are a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to Canada-U.S. relations, says MICHAEL ADAMS

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What a difference a few months have made in the life of our Prime Minister. When Paul Martin was "crowned," he inherited the most popular three-term government in Canada's history; he and his party seemed invincible. At the time, many Canadians -- even many Liberal supporters concerned about what had come to seem a less than robust democratic climate in the country -- worried that the Liberals would win too many, not too few, seats in the next election.

When the Liberals were riding high in the polls and the nominally united Conservatives had yet to coalesce around a leadership convention, it was easy for Mr. Martin to be both Prime Minister and leader of his party. The two roles were virtually identical, as the coronation rhetoric surrounding Mr. Martin's swearing-in attested: The Liberals had become parliamentary royalty, and Paul Martin was their chosen heir.

Four months later, Liberal life is no longer so cushy. The party's popularity ratings at last measure stood at 35 per cent, their lowest level since 1993. A budget, the Prime Minister's cross-Canada tour, and even the hockey playoffs have all failed to distract Canadians from the sponsorship scandal, and the newly united Conservatives seem ready to pose a credible threat to the ruling party.

Mr. Martin, therefore, rather than coasting into a decade-long reign (before being sworn in he stated, perhaps prematurely, that he was hoping to remain Prime Minister for 10 years or so), finds himself poised on the brink of what may well be Canada's first real electoral fight since the *p'tit gars* took office in 1993.

This must be a particularly uncomfortable realization for our Prime Minister, as he surely knows that the Liberals' most trusted tools for drumming up voter support are currently out of commission. With Quebec nationalism becalmed for the moment, the Liberals' usual pitch of being the party that keeps Canada united rings hollow. The promise of more spending is no longer an option now that the last two budgets, one Mr. Martin's, one Jean Chrétien's, have promised down payments on every focus-group-tested issue on the pollsters' radar. So massaging Quebec and augmenting social spending are unlikely to return the Liberals to the kind of popularity that will assure them a majority government.

Under these trying conditions, what's the leader of an ailing Liberal Party to do? Well, there's always that elephant sitting in the middle of the room. Canada-U.S. relations may be the Liberals' most meaningful opportunity to appear relevant and effective in the eyes of Canadians. But bound up in this opportunity is a substantial challenge: It is in the area of Canada-U.S. relations that, perhaps for the first time, Mr. Martin's interests as Prime Minister may begin to diverge from his interests as Liberal leader.

Mr. Martin is soon to meet with U.S. President George W. Bush to smooth out the quotidian issues of mad cow, softwood lumber and border security. Also on the agenda will be Canada's role in the war on terrorism, as well as in the peacekeeping and nation-building that will be needed after the United States wins its various wars against evil. As Prime Minister, Mr. Martin will be most successful if he is able to broker workable agreements in these areas, and amiably countenance whatever down-home nickname Mr. Bush assigns him (whatever it is, it will doubtless be better than Pooty-Poot, Mr. Bush's name for Vladimir Putin). For Mr. Martin the Liberal leader, however, such an amicable meeting will not be especially helpful.

The Chrétien government's decision not to accompany the Americans and the British into Iraq was a defining moment, not only for the government, but also for Canada. The decision resonated profoundly with the Canadian public, two-thirds of whom supported it. It is the Liberals' ability and willingness to preserve and defend Canadian sovereignty -- as expressed in Mr. Chrétien's refusal to join the coalition of the willing -- that is currently their greatest strength. Paul Martin the Prime Minister is by nature a realist and a consensus-builder; but Paul Martin the Liberal leader must be willing to get his hands dirty and find a way to assure Canadians that the Liberals' willingness to assert Canadian sovereignty isn't meandering around a golf course with Mr. Chrétien. The Prime Minister's upcoming trip to Washington may be a timely opportunity.

A nationalist flourish on the White House lawn has the potential to be something of a magic bullet for the Martin Liberals, as it could deal simultaneous blows to rivals creeping up on the government both in English Canada and in Quebec. One possible target of the magic bullet is the revitalized Conservative Party, which (particularly in its more Alliance-flavoured quarters) takes a much more deferential approach to our U.S. neighbours than have the Liberals. If Mr. Martin can cast the Liberals as the party of Canadian distinctness, and the Conservatives as yes-men to the Americans, he will gain votes from former Progressive Conservatives, particularly the Red Tories whose United Empire Loyalist genes dictate a more nationalist posture when it comes to Canada-U.S. relations. Also, pressing the tender nerve of Canadian nationalism will stanch any erosion of nationalist Liberals to Jack Layton's quietly resurgent New Democratic Party.

The other target the magic bullet might strike is the Bloc Québécois. The Bloc is resurgent in Quebec not because Quebec nationalism has awoken from its slumber, but because the sponsorship scandal has rankled Quebecers, who sense that it has caused an old stereotype to re-emerge in English Canada: that of Quebec as a corrupt province, home to a people on the take. It is in Quebec where Mr. Chrétien's refusal to march to Iraq enjoyed the highest approval ratings. If Mr. Martin can position himself as the bearer of that particular torch of the Chrétien government, he may be able to shift the emotions that have fuelled the progress

the Bloc has made in recent months.

Ideally, Paul Martin the Liberal leader would be able to score some symbolic blow for Canada -- an emotionally, if not politically, potent victory, like an Olympic gold in hockey -- without so angering the Bush administration that Paul Martin the Prime Minister would regret it in the morning. But the balance he would have to strike is almost yogic in its difficulty, and the Bush administration, not known for its subtlety, is unlikely to play along with that particular bit of political theatre.

Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew has told Quebeckers that, had Stephen Harper been prime minister last year, Canadian boys and girls would now be caught in the increasingly bloody morass that is Iraq. That is probably true. What is not clear is whether the same would be true had Mr. Martin assumed power a year earlier. He has told Canadians that he supported the government's decision to stay home. Now, if he wants to be re-elected with a comfortable majority, he has to make a move that will show Canadians that he knows when to get along with Americans to resolve inevitable bilateral irritants, and when to risk the ire of the U.S. administration if fundamental Canadian values are at stake.

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