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Not just big bucks and a mighty political machine

Now that John Manley has thrown in the towel, leaving only dark horse Sheila Copps blocking the way to the Prime Minister's Office, SHAWN McCARTHY looks at the real secrets of the former finance minister's success. No, it's not just big bucks and a mighty political machine

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When he entered the Liberal leadership race in March, John Manley knew that Paul Martin's support among party members was a mile wide. His only hope to mount a serious challenge was that their attachment to Mr. Martin was also an inch deep and he'd be able to pry some of those supporters loose. When he quit the race this week, Mr. Manley had succeeded beyond his own expectations in signing up new members. But he admitted to failing at the



more vital task: persuading current Liberals to jump ship and back a long shot. This level of commitment may have surprised Mr. Manley, but not party insiders and veteran political observers.

They knew that the Liberal Party, more than any other, loves a winner. And for years, Mr. Martin has been the heir apparent — the man most Canadians have said they want to succeed Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. He has taken on an almost unprecedented status as a political chameleon. People of all ideological stripes seem to attribute to him the qualities they most want in a leader.

Pollster Jaime Watt has studied the chameleon closely.

"The Martin phenomenon is astonishing in its breadth, and depth and completeness," he says. "Canadians have just decided he's the next guy — it's inevitable, like night follows day, like spring follows winter."

Mr. Watt's research was conducted for a private-sector client, but he is a Progressive Conservative — co-chair of Ontario Premier Ernie Eves's upcoming

re-election campaign, in fact. Yet even he admits that Mr. Martin appeals to an incredibly broad constituency.

"People are able to project on him what they want; he owns 'tough fiscal manager' and he owns 'compassionate social reformer.' "

So, if Liberals really do prosper because they campaign from the left and govern from the right, Mr. Martin should do well. MP Carolyn Bennett recalls a barnburner of a speech he gave in St. Paul's, her Toronto riding, during the 1997 campaign. His deficit cuts were stripping billions from health care, post-secondary education and unemployment insurance, yet he rallied the crowd with exhortations of such Liberal values as compassion and sharing.

Dorothy Davey, wife of Trudeau-era organizer Keith Davey, exclaimed to Ms. Bennett: "Isn't it great to feel like a Liberal again?"

That dichotomy surfaced again last spring, when Mr. Martin was addressing a conference on Third World development in Montreal. When he called on rich countries to ensure that globalization helps the poor, someone asked why, then, had he slashed Canada's foreign-aid budget so much?

The deficit, he replied, simply had to be tamed.

Looking back, Ipsos-Reid pollster Darrell Bricker says that, after the roller-coaster ride of the Brian Mulroney era, Canadians embraced Mr. Chrétien's managerial style. But now they are looking for a leader who can articulate Canada's place in the world.

He likens Mr. Martin to British Prime Minister Tony Blair or former U.S. president Bill Clinton. "He's a much more modern-appearing leader" than Mr. Chrétien, and "has the ability to connect with people and inspire them through the mass media."

As a result, Liberals see in him a candidate who can give the party something it hasn't had in a long time: a serious shot at electoral success in every region of the country. None of his challengers, past or present, has come remotely close to matching that broad appeal.

But the prospect of electoral success only partly explains the Liberals' love affair with the onetime businessman whose striking blue eyes and furrowed brow can make him look like a saint, especially when judiciously backlit by an enterprising photographer.

Like Brian Tobin and Allan Rock, vanquished contenders before him, Mr. Manley has attributed the impregnable Martin position to organizational might. After all, his rivals rightly note, Mr. Martin has essentially been running for the leadership since losing the race to Mr. Chrétien in 1990.

In bowing out of the race, Mr. Manley gave credit to the Martin team for "locking down" the party. Two-and-a-half years ago, Mr. Tobin quit both his unofficial campaign and federal politics, saying that Mr. Martin had a stranglehold on the party.

But "winnability" and "organizational might" can't be acquired by just any ambitious politician.

His supporters say Mr. Martin has earned that level of support – from the public as well as the Liberal rank-and-file – because he combines tireless energy with an innovative, caring and committed approach to government that resonates with people.

His critics acknowledge that he has demonstrated political skill, but they are more apt to credit his many savvy advisers, largely housed in Earncliffe Strategy Group, the Ottawa consulting firm. That coterie, rival Liberals complain, has marketed Mr. Martin like soap, using sophisticated polling and focus-group strategies to hone the image of Paul Martin the Deficit Slayer, and more recently, Paul Martin, All Things to All People.

Back in March, the Manley camp believed Mr. Martin was too tightly scripted to withstand the heat and scrutiny of a leadership contest. They noted that, since 1993, he has rehearsed his most important speeches ad nauseam, and only after Earncliffe has run the key lines past focus groups.

Mr. Manley's team argued, with some merit, that Mr. Martin had maintained his broad appeal in recent years by refusing to take strong stands on major issues; it promised to smoke him out during the campaign. Wait until the debates, Manley supporters told reporters, when he is standing on his own without the backroom scriptwriters. He would crumple, they suggested, like a puppet without the strings.

Instead, Mr. Martin laid out a series of policy positions, including some controversial ones on support for the U.S. missile-defence system and the limitations on Canada's support for the United Nations.

And he sailed through the debates. The format, set by Martin supporters within the party hierarchy, left little opportunity for concerted attacks on him. But sparks did fly, and he more than held his own.

Liberal MP Maurizio Bevilacqua, the junior finance minister and longtime Martin supporter, contends that the critics underestimate the man. "You have to have the product," he says, referring to the Earncliffe marketing effort. "He's like Coke – he's the real thing."

Certainly, Mr. Martin has come a long way from the somewhat clumsy, wonkish character who, after only two years in Parliament, presented himself to the party as potential leadership material in 1990. By running a strong second to Mr. Chrétien, he assured himself a key role when the Tories were swept from office three years later.

After serving as co-chair of the policy committee that wrote the famous Red Book for the 1993 campaign, he assumed the politically dangerous but crucial portfolio, finance. There, thanks to the hugely successful battle against the deficit, he established his reputation as the most capable and eloquent of the Liberal cabinet ministers. His profile rivaled that of Mr. Chrétien, particularly among the influential business community and in the media.

As a result, his cabinet rivals – and Mr. Chrétien's supporters – groused. Ministers such as Mr. Manley, Mr. Rock and Heritage Minister Sheila Copps, now his lone remaining leadership competitor, complained that he was quick to take credit for taming the deficit. But it was the front-line ministers – or the Prime Minister himself – who took the flak when the 1995 budget slashed their spending.

Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett, an unabashed fan, says that he practises what is described in *Primary Colors*, the veiled biography of former Bill Clinton, "aerobic listening." And like the ex-president, Mr. Martin is keenly interested in the details of policy and loves nothing better than a lively, even heated debate about issues that would make most Canadians' eyes glaze over.

"Around a table, if you say something remotely interesting, his head will pick up," she says. "If it is quite good, he'll make eye contact with a staffer to make sure they get it down. Then, he might call you to ask questions about the point."

Mr. Martin has demonstrated that knack as a minister appearing at a Parliamentary committee hearing and during the "town hall" meetings he conducted this spring.

Faced with opposition critics before a committee, he would attempt to disarm them with flattery – frequently complimenting a tormenter for his incisive question, rarely rejecting a premise out of hand.

During the town hall sessions, he frequently turned to someone with a question in the audience and asked what solution he or she would propose to the problem at hand.

As finance critic for the Canadian Alliance, MP Monte Solberg jostled regularly with Mr. Martin, and says his approach is too calculated; he can come across like talk-show host Phil Donahue.

Ms. Bennett says the personal charisma is just an extension of Mr. Martin's natural, intellectual curiosity and old-fashioned good manners. But Mr. Solberg insists that "it can be very superficial – all hat and no head. That will wear thin very quickly, if people sense that there is nothing else to you other than charm."

Echoing Mr. Martin's Liberal critics, he also says the next prime minister has been riding on his reputation since balancing the books in 1998.

"What else has he done, really? For the last year and a half at least, he has been silent on the major issues of our day."

Martin strategists shrug off such criticism.

They point to his reform of the Canada Pension Plan, which has left Canada as one of the few industrial countries to have a solvent public retirement system; his post-deficit budgets that delivered debt reduction, the largest single tax cut in Canadian history and targeted spending in health, post-secondary education and support for poor families; and his work on the international stage, which was recognized this week by the United Nations.

Yesterday, Mr. Martin was at UN headquarters in New York City to launch the commission on the private sector and Third World development that he will co-chair with former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo.

Why is he doing this in the middle of a leadership race, even one he seems to have in the bag? Mr. Bevilacqua says it's because, being so well known and respected among global powerbrokers, he can bring something special to the task.

But it also may be that, after 10 years at the centre of power, a man who's about

to turn 65 next month is vulnerable to a general fatigue with the Liberal government and the desire for change and a new generation.

It's a thought that haunts him and his advisers as they hope to persuade Canadians that he is both a safe choice and an agent of change.

They take much solace from internal polling that shows their candidate is far and away the people's choice -- at least at the moment and in the current field.

Polling done in April showed his approval rating at 60 per cent nationwide -- well ahead of Mr. Chrétien's still-respectable 47 per cent.

The Martin team also found that he even outscored both Stephen Harper in Alberta, the Canadian Alliance leader's stronghold (56 to 42) and New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton in Toronto, the long-time municipal councillor's home turf.

Senior campaign strategist David Herle, one of those Earncliffe advisers, says that Mr. Martin's public support has actually improved over the past year despite internal battles, first with Mr. Chrétien and then in the leadership race.

He points to "four critical pillars" of his success: the record as finance minister, his values of the fiscally prudent liberalism he espouses, his leadership attributes (such as a national vision that's sensitive to the regions), and his stature on the world stage.

"I think, over the course of the last year . . . people have gotten a more well-rounded sense of him, and they now have a sense of what he would be like as prime minister," Mr. Herle contends, "and the data indicate that they are overwhelmingly approving of that."

But pollsters look ahead and warn that the overwhelming nature of that approval may pose a big problem for Mr. Martin. When he has to make tough decisions that feature losers as well as winners, they say, his popularity is sure to erode.

Mr. Chrétien took over the Liberal leadership tagged as "yesterday's man." People didn't expect all that much from him and, just as he had throughout his career, he looked good by clearing a relatively low hurdle.

Mr. Martin, however, arrives having inspired great expectations from the electorate. He and his team have much higher to jump.

"It's like the guy is walking on water right now," says Mr. Bricker. "At some point, he is going to get wet, at least up to his knees. We'll see then how they deal with the expectations."

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