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Martin is heading for trouble with Premiers, Parliament and the U.S.

Enough now has been said by and about Paul Martin for all of us to guess where he will steer the grand national bus.

He gave an interesting outline of his thinking in Toronto on December 9.

"Fundamentally," he declared, "what we have to do is change the way that Ottawa works."

There are three priorities. First, Canada must be at the leading edge of the 21st century economy; second, social programs must meet Canada's evolving needs; and third, Canada must enhance its international prestige and influence.

Note that these are "the nation's objectives," not just his. They are now yours and mine.

The first priority in achieving the three basic priorities, Martin elaborated, is to review and measure every single national program and expenditure against two overriding priorities--is this expenditure achieving its ends, and are its ends still worth achieving?

After all, "government has to understand that a dollar misspent is a dollar taken away from a Canadian who really needs it." (No, Paul, it's a dollar taken away from a Canadian who OWNS it--whether or not you think he "needs" it.)

This dynamic program review will free up resources for three very exciting new priorities.

The first priority is "changing the way Ottawa works with the other governments you elect." This means better central government relations with the provinces and a "New Deal" for cities.

Even though cities are within the constitutional "ambit" of the provinces, Martin acknowledged, "the fate of our country and of our cities is inextricably linked." So it's time Ottawa "helped" more aggressively.

The second main priority is making Parliament and the national government "more accountable." Fundamentally, he said, this means more free votes in Parliament. "Parliament must become the front line in the debate of new ideas."

The third main priority is to make globalization work for all of humanity.

From this speech and what he has done since, several things seem obvious.

Martin will not have peace with the provinces. All the social programs and urban responsibilities he has such grand designs for are in the sovereign jurisdiction of provincial governments, which can and will angrily resist his encroachments.

He will not reform democracy. Anyone seeking rapid change can't afford to wait around while 301 people say what their constituents think about the new activities of 39

ministers and 26 parliamentary secretaries. Martin's need to show "results" will immediately rule out restoring any meaningful power of Parliament to get in the way

As Donald Savoie points out in his book "Governing from the Centre", you can have a large, bureaucratic government run by a few, or you can have a vibrant democracy, but not both.

Finally, Martin's enthusiasm for globalism, if it ever amounts to anything resembling policy, will offend the Americans, who reject Kyoto, UN social policy, and Canada's holier-than-thou abandonment of the Anglo-American alliance of the last century. And they can kill us economically.

"As a nation," Martin said in Toronto, "we can do whatever we put our minds to."

All it takes is a happy thought and a little pixie dust. If he seriously believes such rhetoric he will fail as prime minister.

- Link Byfield

Link Byfield is chairman of the Edmonton-based Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy.

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