

Clement clips Martin

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Tony Clement, the former Ontario health minister who is vying to lead the federal Conservatives, says Prime Minister Paul Martin was either "implicated or incompetent" for allowing taxpayers' money to be funnelled to Liberal friends through schemes outlined last week by the Auditor-General.



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The sponsorship scandal is "the closest Canada has come to our very own Enron — wide-scale looting of the taxpayers' coffers to benefit the friends of the Liberal Party," Mr. Clement told a joint meeting of Toronto's Empire and Canadian clubs in a banquet room salted with his supporters, including former Tory cabinet minister John Crosbie.

"Paul Martin was the chief financial officer of this terrible and crooked enterprise," Mr. Clement said. "As CFO, he was either implicated or incompetent. Either way, he is accountable."

The written version of his speech went on to add: "Enron's CFO is on his way to jail," but Mr. Clement dropped that line when speaking from the podium.

Asked about the line later, he said: "... I'm saying Canadians want answers and I'm saying, when the answers were found in the Enron case, it wasn't just the CEO [chief executive officer] who was implicated, it was the CFO."

The money channelled improperly through the federal sponsorship program was a large, systematic scheme to defraud Canadian taxpayers, he said. "It strains credulity to think that the CFO, the man writing the cheques, the minister of finance for the Dominion of Canada, would know nothing about what is going on."

Mr. Clement, whose campaign seems to be gaining some momentum as the March 20 vote draws nearer, was rewarded with several standing ovations from the heavily partisan business crowd. He said the sponsorship scandal has changed the nature of the Conservative leadership campaign

"This is about the future of the country now, it's not just about an intramural contest. And part of how we are going to be judged, part of how we should be judged, as leadership candidates is how we can best take on Paul Martin."

Mr. Crosbie said the scandal has made Conservatives realize they have a chance of winning the next election. "That's another reason to support Tony Clement" over former Magna CEO Belinda Stronach, a woman who has never held office and does not speak French, he said.

"How can you lead a national political party if you have no experience in politics at all?" Mr. Crosbie asked, adding "my own experience tells me you can't be a national leader if you don't speak both official languages."

As for Mr. Harper, who in the past talked about the defeatist attitude of Atlantic Canadians, Mr. Crosbie said he does not have much support in that region, "and I don't think [he] would do as well there as some other person leading the party."

