

Office of the
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**ADDRESS BY
PRIME MINISTER PAUL MARTIN
TO THE NATION**

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Good evening.

I want to talk to you directly tonight – about the problems in the sponsorship program; about how I've responded to them as your prime minister; and about the timing of the next general election.

Let me speak plainly: what happened with the sponsorship file occurred on the watch of a Liberal government. Those who were in power are to be held responsible. And that includes me.

I was the Minister of Finance. Knowing what I've learned this past year, I am sorry that we weren't more vigilant - that I wasn't more vigilant. Public money was misdirected and misused. That's unacceptable. And that is why I apologized to the Canadian people a year ago.

But taking responsibility is about more than words. I want to tell you what I've done as Prime Minister to deal with the sponsorship scandal – to make sure it does not happen again, to make sure that those who violated the public trust will be identified and will pay the consequences.

On December 12, 2003, I cancelled the sponsorship program. It was my very first act on my very first day in office.

When the Auditor-General's report was publicly tabled, I acted immediately by ordering a fully independent commission of inquiry, under Mr. Justice John Gomery. Its mandate is to get to the bottom of what happened, and to do it in full view of Canadians. It will report before the end of the year.

And I think you'll agree – Judge Gomery is leaving no stone unturned.

In addition, I fired Alfonso Gagliano, the minister responsible for the sponsorship program, from his appointment as Ambassador to Denmark.

I put in strict new controls on spending within every single government department.

My government brought forward whistleblower legislation to ensure that when public servants and others come forward with evidence of wrongdoing, they are protected, not punished.

To recover taxpayers' money – money that went to those who did not earn it -- I ordered my government to sue 19 people and companies for more than \$40-million.

I committed to acting on the recommendations of Judge Gomery when he brings forth his final report. And I myself testified before his commission, answering any and all questions.

Finally, I ordered that the Liberal party bring in auditors to conduct a forensic examination of its books - and call in the RCMP to investigate what took place during that period.

Let me emphasize that point: if so much as a dollar is found to have made its way into the Liberal party from ill-gotten gains, it will be repaid to the people of Canada. I want no part of that money.

As Prime Minister, I will never hesitate to describe what happened on the sponsorship file for what it was: an unjustifiable mess. It's up to me to clean it up. That's my job. I am cleaning it up. And I am willing to be judged on my record of action.

In recent weeks, fallout from the sponsorship inquiry has led to speculation about an election – which in turn is consuming virtually all political discussion, at least here on Parliament Hill. Initiatives to improve health care, strengthen our economy and ensure for Canada a role of pride and influence in the world are being obscured by partisan jousting.

In short, the Parliament you sent to Ottawa less than a year ago is preoccupied with election talk and with political strategy – not with the job you sent us here to do.

As people focus their attention on the commission's hearings, let's remember that the inquiry is being held in front of a judge for good reason.

There is conflicting testimony; only the judge is in a position to determine the truth. Only he can cut through the partisan politics. Only he can tell us what happened and who was responsible.

We've all heard that the opposition may defeat the government and take the country to the polls for the second time in a year.

I am prepared to face Canadians and have them judge my response to this serious test of leadership. I will be politically accountable. But I believe that before there is an election, you are entitled to answers – to the answers that Judge Gomery is working toward. I believe that Canadians deserve a full and frank accounting of all the facts. Fairness and due process require nothing less.

For that reason, I commit to you tonight that I will call a general election within 30 days of the publication of the commission's final report and recommendations. Let Judge Gomery do his work. Let the facts come out. And then the people of Canada will have their say.

If the Opposition forces an election before then, that is their choice. But I believe we can do better. I believe we can – and we should – use the coming months to pursue the public's business. To act on the issues that matter most to you and make a difference in your life.

If we are to have an election, one that will be at least in part about the work of Judge Gomery, surely that election should occur only when we have the work of Judge Gomery.

In closing, let me say this: there are people who think I was wrong to call this inquiry, wrong to expose my government to the political cost of the scrutiny that has ensued. They warn we will pay a price in the next election. And perhaps we will.

But I trust your judgment. And I will not dishonour this office by trying to conceal or diminish such offensive wrongdoing. I have too much respect for this place.

When I was young, I practically lived here in the Parliament Buildings. My father was a cabinet minister in four Liberal governments. He taught me that those who serve in public office have a duty to protect the integrity of government.

My pledge to you tonight is that I will live up to that ideal. I went into public life because I believe in the good that government can do. And I will do my all as Prime Minister to make sure that your government is worthy of your respect.

The final judgment on whether I have done that will be yours.

Thank you. And good night.