

The business community greeted Paul Martin's (right) tough budget on Feb. 27 with applause. Of course, so did fellow Liberals Jean Chretien (left), Herb Gray and others.

The House of Commons' annual seven-week Christmas break has arrived in the nick of time, giving Prime Minister Jean Chretien and his demoralized Liberal troops a chance to regroup. They now have some time to regain perspective after a traumatic and exhausting autumn, time to get out of Ottawa and the oppressive atmosphere of impending doom that has gripped Parliament Hill.

Chretien, Liberals need time to regroup

by JOAN BRYDEN
Southam News

OTTAWA — Jean Chretien has been saved by the bell — Christmas bells, to be exact.

His government was sent reeling by the near-loss in the Oct. 30 Quebec referendum and has been on the ropes ever since, pummelled from all sides over the prime minister's haphazard efforts to pull the country back together again.

But the Commons' annual seven-week Christmas break has arrived in the nick of time, giving Chretien and his demoralized Liberal troops a chance to pick themselves up off the mat. They now have some time to regroup, re-gain perspective after a traumatic and exhausting fall and escape the oppressive atmosphere of impending doom that has gripped Parliament Hill.

By itself, the seven-week respite from petty partisan politics will be a healing salve, not only for shaken Liberals but for the battered national psyche. Liberal and Reform MPs alike admit politicians only helped push the country closer to the brink during the last few venomous weeks of name-calling and finger-pointing in the regionally balkanized Commons.

Indeed, the antics have been so mean-spirited, Chretien's composure so rattled, many Liberals are now urging the prime minister to keep the Commons shut down until late February or early March. So far, however, Chretien seems inclined to stick to the scheduled Feb. 5 re-opening.

Whenever MPs return, Liberal strategists acknowledge the government must take bold steps to ensure the Commons doesn't devolve again into a unity slugfest. Chretien must regain control of the agenda and shift the focus off the corrosive unity debate, which only seems to exacerbate regional tensions.

In essence, insiders say he needs to return to his pre-referendum strategy. No more symbolic or quasi-constitutional gestures to accommodate Quebec. Instead, prove to Quebecers that Canada works by providing good government focused on job creation, economic growth and sound fiscal management.

To do that, however, Chretien will first need to shuffle his cabinet, reinvigorating a team that appears to have run out of ideas.

Insiders expect a shuffle in January, either just before a Jan. 8-20 trade mission to India, or — more likely — just after Chretien returns.

Conflicting rumors abound about who will get what portfolio but most Liberals agree Chretien needs to accomplish several goals:

— Inject new blood and better regional representation — particularly from Quebec and British Columbia — into cabinet.

Backbenchers widely touted for promotion include Brant MP Jane Stewart, Winnipeg MP David Walker, Quebecers Martin Cauchon and Denis Paradiis

UPDATE

The issue: Prime Minister Jean Chretien's government has been reeling ever since the near-loss in the Oct. 30 Quebec referendum.

What's new: Liberals are hoping they can pull themselves together over the Christmas break, put the referendum behind them and come back in the new year with a new agenda focused on jobs and the economy.

What it means: Chretien will take a number of steps to give his government a fresh look, including a cabinet shuffle in January and a throne speech, likely in February.

and either Hedy Fry or Herb Dhaliwal from Vancouver. As well, several secretaries of state, in particular Montreal MP Alfonso Gagliano, could be elevated to the ranks of senior ministers.

Liberal insiders believe Chretien must add a few new faces if only to demonstrate to his increasingly restive caucus that rewards await those who remain loyal.

— Clear out the dead wood. Hapless Heritage Minister Michel Dupuy is widely expected to get the boot, although he may be given a soft landing with an ambassadorial appointment.

Health Minister Diane Marleau appears to have redeemed herself recently but is expected to be demoted to a less-sensitive portfolio, like National Revenue.

— Reward his most effective communicators and politically astute ministers with the high-profile portfolios that will be key to the feel-good agenda.

Fisheries Minister Brian Tobin, the one unqualified star in cabinet, is touted for industry or health and Justice Minister Allan Rock for health or human resources. Deputy Prime Minister Sheila Copps and Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi are also touted for promotions, possibly to health and heritage, respectively.

There are a number of factors, however, which could complicate Chretien's efforts to put a new face on his government.

For instance, it has been widely assumed that veteran Andre Ouellet would be appointed ambassador to Paris, opening up foreign affairs for Human Resources Minister Lloyd Axworthy and making room for a new,

younger Quebec face at the cabinet table. However, insiders now say Ouellet is unlikely to leave since it's uncertain the Liberals could retain his Montreal seat in a byelection.

If Ouellet doesn't leave foreign affairs, insiders say Axworthy, who has long coveted the post, has threatened to quit.

At the same time, Chretien could lose Tobin if he decides to return home to Newfoundland to succeed Premier Clyde Wells. Wells is widely expected to be appointed chief justice of the province's supreme court within days.

The loss of Tobin and/or Axworthy would be a major blow to Chretien, one that could be interpreted as rats fleeing a sinking ship, reinforcing the sense of a government in crisis.

While a cabinet shuffle is key to making a fresh start, Chretien is expected to reinforce that message by proroguing Parliament and opening a new session with a throne speech setting out a new agenda for the second half of his mandate.

The timing for the throne speech is up in the air, since all bills die on the order paper when Parliament is prorogued. Chretien is unlikely to prorogue until the Tory-dominated Senate passes his regional constitutional veto bill, which won't happen until at least Feb. 2 and which could take weeks more if the Senate decides to amend the bill.

In any event, insiders say Chretien wants to get the budget out of the way



in late February — a logical conclusion to the deficit-busting first half of the mandate — before formally embarking on a new jobs-oriented second half.

Of course, Chretien must have a new agenda to announce if the throne speech is to be more than just political theatre.

To that end, a special committee of cabinet is working on proposals to revitalize the government's job creation efforts — the issue upon which the Liberals won election but which has since taken a back seat to deficit reduction.

Exactly what the committee will recommend is unclear. Insiders say substantive new initiatives will be introduced but the government will also attempt to better publicize existing programs.

Even before the committee finishes its report, Chretien will attempt to refocus the agenda during his Team Canada trade mission to India. He will be accompanied by at least seven premiers and hundreds of business leaders on the trip, which is expected to rustle up roughly \$4 billion in trade deals.

Strategists hope the sight of the prime minister and premiers working together to hustle trade and job opportunities — instead of squabbling over unity strategies — will send a positive signal about the government's new priorities.

After India, however, Chretien will

concentrate on selling Canada to Canadians, rather than foreign investors. He's expected to spend a lot of time travelling the country, starting with a caucus meeting in Vancouver at the end of January.

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WEDNESDAY EVENING DECEMBER 27, 1996

	6:00 p.m.	6:30 p.m.	7:00 p.m.	7:30 p.m.	8:00 p.m.	8:30 p.m.	9:00 p.m.	9:30 p.m.	10:00 p.m.	10:30 p.m.	11:00 p.m.
2	Beverly Hills, 90210 (CC)	Dave's World	Bless-House	American Gothic (CC)	News (CC)				Sports Night	Comedy	Star Trek
3 (2)	Home Imp.	Seinfeld (CC)	Extra (CC) • Dinosaurus (CC)	Sequest 2032 (CC)	Grace Under	Seinfeld (CC)	National/CBC News (CC)	News			
5 (4)	Mr. Bean	Ce Soir-C.B.	Telejournal (25) Le Point	Les Parlementaires (SC)	Direction sud (Partie 1 de 2)				Chauve peut	Ce Soir-C.B.	"Tropique"
6	NBC News	News (CC)	Evening Mag.	Am.Journal	TV Censored Bloopers	Dateline (CC)			Law & Order "Blood Libel"		News (CC)
7	CBS News	Cheers	Married...	Extra (CC)	Dave's World	Bless-House	Matt Waters (CC)		American Gothic (CC)		News
8	ABC News	News (CC)	Wh. Fortune	Jeopardy!	Ellen (CC)	Drew Carey	Grace Under	Naked Truth	Primetime Live (CC)		News (CC)
9	Newshour With Jim Lehrer	Science Guy	3,000 Garden	New Explorers (CC)			Great Performances "The Rake's Progress"				Red Dwarf
10	Around Prince George	Spotlight	Discovery	Community Bulletin Board							Bulletin
11 (12)	News (CC)	Wh. Fortune	Jeopardy!	Ellen (CC)	Drew Carey		World Vision		Primetime Live (CC)		CTV News
13	Diana's Hair	White Out	White Out	Name-Health	Campaign		Zero Tolerance		Between the Lines		Born Talking
15	American Justice	20th Century (R)		Law & Order "Profile"	Biography: Betty Grable				American Justice (R)		20th Century
16	Hockey: World Jr. Champ. Semifinal		Sport Diver	Sportsdesk (CC)	Extreme Hour				Skiing	Ski Report	Sportsdesk
17	Larry King Live (CC)	World News		Sports	Moneyline	NewsNight	Showbiz		NewsNight	Sports	Larry King
18	Music City Tonight (R) (1)		Club Dance (R) (1)		News	The Road (R) (1)			Music City Tonight (R) (1)		
20	(5:30) Damix	Videoflow		Fax (R)	Spotlight (R)	Videoflow			Rap City (R)	Wedge (R)	
21	Wonders	Connections2	After the Flood (R)	Ultrascience	Quantum (R)	Wonders	Connections2	After the Flood (R)		Furniture	
22	Flash	Movie ★★ "A Mom for Christmas"		Disney's Christmas on Ice	"Meanest Man in World"		Van Dyke	"The Son of Monte Cristo"			
24	NBA Basketball: Rockets at Bulls		Movie ★★ "Bloodsport" (1988) Time Approximate:		Movie ★★ "The Protector" (1985) Jackie Chan.						
25	(5:00) "Doctor in Distress"		Movie ★★ "Doctor in Clover" (1966) Leslie Phillips.		Movie ★★ "Curtains" (1983) (CC)				Movie ★★ "First Love"		
26	Super Dave	Garfield	Santo Bugito	You Afraid?	Madison (1)	Reboot (1)	Reboot (1)	It's Alive (1)	Neon Rider (CC)		Catwalk (R)
27	Pamela Wallin Live (CC)	Fifth Estate (CC)		National	Sports	National	Face Off (R)	Fifth Estate (R) (CC)		Lead (R)	
28	Likely Lad	For Example	Desmonds	Bahai	Cutting Edge		Let's Sing	Creation	Skylight	About Time	Huntley
30	Wayans	Unhappily	News (1) (CC)		Swaps	Simon & Simon		H'mooner	In the Heat of the Night (1)	H'mooner	
31	Envoyé	Côte science	Paris lum.	J'nal Belge	Gabriel	Visions		(8:50) Cercle de minuit	Ça se discute (R)		
37	House of Commons Info-Text										House of Commons Info-Text

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