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Manchettes**

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Table of Contents/ Table des matières

MCLELLAN'S FATE COULD BE AFFECTED BY DEBATE..... 3

CBC.CA Edmonton

McLellan's fate could be affected by debate

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CBC News

Monday's final English-language leaders' debate will be carefully watched in Alberta's only riding held by a Liberal, as voters try to determine whether Anne McLellan will still be in a position of power after the election, political watchers say.

Lois Harder, a political scientist at the University of Alberta, says some people likely voted for McLellan in Edmonton Centre because as deputy prime minister in a Liberal government she had a lot of clout.

Now, with the Liberals appearing to trail the Conservatives in recent polls, the final debates Monday and Tuesday seem to be carrying more weight.

INDEPTH: Canada Votes 2006 "A debate matters, absolutely," Harder said. "It's very important and it can really change the direction of the campaign.

"People who live in her riding are going to make calculations on the basis of whether or not they think she's going to continue to have this good job as the deputy prime minister or not."

McLellan has won her riding four times, with her biggest margin of victory 1,400 votes in 1997. In her first election, in 1993, she won by just 12 votes, and she won by about 700 in both 2000 and 2004.

"A lot of Liberals are saying it's time for a change," Conservative Laurie Hawn, who challenged McLellan in 2004 and is running against her again this year, said. McLellan says she's concentrating on undecided voters.

"I don't think a lot of people thought a lot about this before Christmas," she said. "All those people have to make up their minds."

The final English-language debate takes place in Montreal Monday, while the French-language debate goes Tuesday.

In 2004, 26 of Alberta's 28 seats were won by the Conservatives. The Liberals won two, but Edmonton MP David Kilgour left the party to sit as an independent.