

PM claims Harper unfit for office

Layton hints of co-operation with Tories

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CanWest News Service

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After three weeks of running a low-key campaign Liberal Leader Paul Martin said Saturday Stephen Harper shouldn't be running for prime minister because of his refusal to protect same-sex marriages as a charter right, while the Tory leader labelled the PM's flag-waving patriotism as phoney.

The accusations came in the wake of Friday's English leaders' debates in which NDP Leader Jack Layton was declared the hands down winner as the people's choice for most likeable federal leader, according to a post-debate survey by Ipsos Reid.

That poll found Martin eked out a narrow victory over Harper — 32 per cent to 30 per cent — on the question of who won the debate.

Almost one quarter — 24 per cent — said the winner was Layton, who on Saturday said his party will try to spare Canadians another election anytime soon, even if that means working with a Conservative minority government that opposes his party's support of same-sex couples.

Those remarks are his clearest to date on what the NDP would do if it succeeds in seizing the balance of power after the Jan. 23 vote.

"If we're starting the election by saying, we're not going to work with other MPs who are elected, that would be a terrible attitude," Layton said after a rally in downtown Vancouver.

But it was Martin and Harper who ramped up the campaign rhetoric on Saturday. Martin, in a fiery speech in front of supporters in Vancouver, said Harper would "turn back the clock" on same-sex rights and try to deny a charter right.

"And if the charter of rights is there to protect us, then we look to the prime minister of the country to protect the charter. And in my view, if you won't protect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, then you have no business trying to become prime minister of Canada."

Harper responded to Martin's statements during a campaign rally in Edmonton



CREDIT: Jonathan Hayward, CP
Conservative Leader Stephen Harper addresses a rally in Edmonton on Saturday, Dec. 17, 2005.

on Saturday night.

"Today after the debates Mr. Martin suggested that anyone who disagrees with him on the marriage issue is unfit for political office," he said. "I say that Canada is a democracy. We must be able to disagree on these issues and we must accept the right of the people to choose who leads them."

Earlier while campaigning in British Columbia, the Tory leader called Martin's defence of Canada during Friday's leader's debate hypocritical and explained his own unemotional approach to the event. Harper said the public is aware Martin's declared passion for Canada didn't prevent the former shipping magnate, who transferred Canada Steamship Lines to his three sons in 2003, from registering CSL vessels in overseas countries to save taxes.

"I think the problem with Mr. Martin's passion is, it's all phoney," Harper told reporters here on Saturday. "It's great to wrap yourself in the flag, but when your own business interests are at stake you fly the flag of another country."

All Canadians know that federal politicians with all parties, with the exception of the Bloc Quebecois, love Canada, he said.

"I think people know there's a fair degree of hypocrisy there."

Harper said his goal Friday was to answer questions posed by Canadians in the debates in a thoughtful and respectful manner.

Emotional outbursts, he said, are for partisan rallies.

"I'm not there to sing and dance and act for the cameras. I'm there to communicate a direction for the country, and give serious and intelligent answers to people."

On Saturday, Harper also unveiled more of the Tory platform. Citizens in B.C., Alberta and Ontario will get greater representation in the House of Commons if the Conservatives form government, Harper said. He said he expects B.C. would get up to four more seats, Alberta two or three, and Ontario up to 10, though no provinces will lose seats as the current 308-seat chamber expands in the next redistribution under a Tory government.

Harper added he will strike two judicial inquiries, one on the 1985 Air India terrorist murders and the other on Fraser River sockeye salmon.

The "Stand up for B.C." platform, unveiled at a rally here, is intended to boost party fortunes in the intense three-way battle for B.C.'s 36 seats.

Many politicians and analysts have said that B.C. voters will likely be decisive in determining who forms government. It included a freeze on the privatization of the Ridley Coal Terminal in northern B.C., review Ottawa's handling of B.C.'s \$1.5-billion leaky condo crisis, bring back a dedicated police force for Canadian ports, establish an army base on the West Coast, and help fund a costly treatment plant so the city of Victoria no longer dumps raw sewage into the Pacific Ocean.

Harper said the Liberals, despite Prime Minister Paul Martin's vow to reduce B.C. alienation, don't understand British Columbians and never have. And the New Democratic Party, despite its populist roots from the era of Tommy Douglas and Dave Barrett, doesn't represent ordinary British Columbians.

"Today's NDP is no longer a party of ordinary British Columbians. It's for high taxes, it's soft on crime, and it puts the demands of special interests ahead of

the needs of ordinary working families," he told several hundred supporters at a morning rally.

"Friends, if you want change, if you want attention, if you want to shake the establishment in Ottawa to its foundations, then your choice, your only choice, is to give us more Conservative MPs and help us elect a new Conservative government in this country."

Also on Saturday, the most recent round of CPAC-SES tracking has the Liberals at 39 per cent, the Conservatives at 31 per cent, the New Democrats at 14 per cent, the BQ at 12 per cent and the Green Party at five per cent nationally.

The national random telephone survey of 1,200 Canadians is based on a three-day rolling average completed between Sunday and Tuesday and is accurate plus or minus 2.9 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

When Parliament was dissolved, the Liberals held 133 seats in the 308-seat Commons. The Tories had 98 seats, the Bloc Quebecois 53 and the NDP 18.

There were four Independents and two vacant seats.

The Ipsos Reid survey of viewer reaction to the televised debate — based on Internet responses from 2,611 English-speaking individuals in a pre-selected group — was conducted by Ipsos-Reid for CanWest News Service and Global National.

The results are considered accurate within plus or minus 1.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Ottawa Citizen/Vancouver Sun/with files from Mike Blanchfield and Norma Greenaway

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