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> CANADA'S PARTIES BRACE FOR FIRST ELECTION DEBATES

By **Randall Palmer**
Reuters

Monday, December 12, 2005

BUCKINGHAM, Quebec (Reuters) - Canada's political leaders are bracing for televised election debates this week that could be decisive events in a campaign that has so far yielded few surprises or swings in the polls.

The campaign machines of the four major parties are making their way to Vancouver on the Pacific Coast, where the leaders will prepare for English- and French-language debates on Thursday and Friday. There will be another set of debates next month ahead of election day, on January 23.

En route, the two main contenders have displayed a contrast in political strategies, with the opposition Conservatives plugging away with a new announcement each day, and with Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin running on his record.

"We're building on a very active record of success," Martin told a news conference in southwestern Ontario on Monday. "We're not making promises. We're saying, we've done it and we're going to continue to do it."

Meanwhile, Conservative leader Stephen Harper was on a hockey rink in Buckingham, Quebec, outside Ottawa, promising a C\$500 per child tax credit for fees for hockey or other organized sport.

"We're talking about things that matter to people," Harper told reporters. "We're getting those things out there, and all the information we're seeing on the ground and in our research suggests people are understanding what we're trying to do and responding positively."

The Liberals have been in power for 12 years and had made a long list of promises during the June 2004 election, when they lost their majority in Parliament.

In contrast, they have made just two announcements during the first two weeks of this campaign, one of which was simply a promise to extend a child care program to 10 years from the current five.

So far, the polls have not moved much, and point to another Liberal minority government if an election were held now -- and if the debates do not change the landscape.

A Strategic Counsel poll conducted for the Globe and Mail and CTV showed public support for the Liberals at 35 percent of voters and the Conservatives at 30 percent.

The left-leaning New Democrats, who backed the minority Liberal government for much of this year, were at 15 percent.

An SES/CPAC poll released on Monday put the Liberals at 39 percent, the Conservatives at 31 percent and the New Democrats at 14 percent.

The Liberals had a hiccup on Sunday when Martin's chief spokesman, Scott Reid, scoffed at Harper's plan to offer C\$1,200 per child



■ Conservative Party of Canada leader Stephen Harper speaks during a campaign stop at a hockey arena in Buckingham, Quebec December 12, 2005. REUTERS/Chris Wattie

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under six to help with child care costs at home or at a day-care center.

Reid said it might only be spent on "beer and popcorn." He apologized later for his words but stuck by the thrust of his remarks that the child care allowance would not actually open up subsidized child care spaces.

Harper said the Liberal approach was to work through institutional transfers of funds, while his approach was to work directly through families.

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Smoke fills the sky north of London, on December 12 following explosions at Buncefield fuel depot. (Getty Images)



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