

## Harper risking votes, Calvert warns

### Shots come as new opinion poll places Tories and Liberals in 'statistical' tie

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Saskatchewan's NDP Premier Lorne Calvert warned yesterday the Harper Tory stronghold in his province is in jeopardy as the battle over the broken equalization promise escalates.

"I think the Prime Minister and his Conservative members here better not be taking for granted the support they have in this province," Mr. Calvert told CTV's *Question Period*.

The federal Conservatives have 12 of the 14 seats in Saskatchewan; the Liberals have the other two.

The Premier's warning comes as a new public opinion poll from SES Research shows that the Tories and Liberals are in a statistical tie for support nationally: 36 per cent and 33 per cent respectively.

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The NDP are at 16 per cent, the Bloc at 10 and the Green Party at 6.

However, the poll -- taken between March 31 and April 5 and which is accurate to within 3.2 percentage points 19 times out of 20 -- shows the Liberals have dropped nine points in Quebec in the past two months.

Pollster Nik Nanos says the "federal budget, Quebec provincial election results and the new advertising scandal arrest have put downward pressure on Liberal support in Quebec."

Meanwhile, Mr. Calvert has joined Newfoundland Tory Premier Danny Williams in accusing Prime Minister Stephen Harper of betrayal for refusing to honour an earlier commitment not to cap equalization payments.

Mr. Williams is in his own pitched battle with the federal government, having taken out newspaper ads condemning it for the broken promise on equalization.

Yesterday, Mr. Calvert also accused Mr. Harper of trying to buy votes in Quebec with Saskatchewan's resource revenues.

"We see the resources that belong to the people of Saskatchewan not being provided to the people of Saskatchewan so that we can build our future," he said.

"We see them being provided to other parts of the country, and what for? . . . simply to win more Conservative support in Quebec."

The three Regina Tory MPs have tried to defend their government's budget in a series of radio ads. The three -- Dave Batters, Tom Lukiwski and Andrew Scheer -- spent \$1,890 on ads that ran for two weeks after the March 19 budget.

The ads sing the praises of the Harper government and its commitment to the people of the province:

"We kept our promise on equalization, removed non-renewable resources and delivered \$878-million in new funding for Saskatchewan," says a female voice, talking so quickly she is almost breathless.

"We will receive a \$230 per person increase, which is more than twice the amount Quebec and Manitoba will get. The Conservative government kept its promise and the people of Saskatchewan are the biggest winners."

Mr. Scheer, the Regina-Qu'Appelle Tory MP, said he isn't worried about Mr. Calvert's claims that the federal budget could put his seat in jeopardy.

Rather, he said that the Premier is becoming so "extreme" in his criticism of the federal government that "it's hurting his own credibility."

"He's going to use his position as Premier to try to hurt us federally," said Mr. Scheer, who said that while the federal NDP can't "play the Quebec card," the provincial NDP can.

"They're trying to play this divisive East-versus-West thing," he said.

But Mr. Calvert told *Question Period* that "every Henry and Martha around Saskatchewan" see that Saskatchewan resource money went to a tax cut in Quebec.

"Perceptions very soon become realities," he said.

Just before the March 26 Quebec election, Premier Jean Charest vowed the \$700-million in equalization money would go to pay for a tax cut.

The move was criticized as cynical and Mr. Charest's majority government was reduced to a minority.

"It [equalization] is not a program designed to provide tax cuts for any region or any province in Canada," Mr. Calvert said.

"When we see this happening, as a result of the Prime Minister's desire to build his own support in Quebec for his electoral purposes, you bet the coffee shops in Saskatchewan are saying, 'How does this work?' "

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