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Harper advocates hate-crime revisions

Protections for gays are too vague, he says, but he won't detail his plans

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QUEBEC CITY, OTTAWA -- Conservative Leader Stephen Harper says laws protecting gays and lesbians from hate crimes need to be amended to allay the concern of church groups and others who fear their freedom of expression might be harmed.

"There have been questions raised that in protecting people against hate crimes, we may have gone too far in endangering freedom of religion or freedom of expression, and those concerns can be addressed fairly easily in my judgment, and they should be addressed," Mr. Harper said in Quebec City yesterday. "But I am not going to repeal the law."

Mr. Harper's justice critic said laws need to change to protect organizations such as religious schools from losing public funds for teachings that question the morality of homosexuality.

Mr. Harper's comments came in response to a major attack from the Liberals on what they call his party's social conservatism.

Liberal Leader Paul Martin and others said the Conservatives would trample the rights of women and minorities and gut the Charter of Rights and Freedoms by using the notwithstanding clause to override court rulings they did not like.

The Liberals have been fighting against declining poll numbers, and got no good news yesterday, when a poll put the Conservatives ahead for the first time nationally.

A survey done for Canada's Political Channel (CPAC) by SES Canada Research Inc. put the Conservatives at 34 per cent and the Liberals at 32. The rolling poll of 600 people has a large margin of error, 4.1 percentage points in either direction.

Mr. Harper, in Quebec City for a 45-minute stop to fight Liberal advertisements that paint him as an ideological radical, said the federal law protecting gays and lesbians from hate crimes is too vague.

Appearing testy after questioning by reporters, and not wanting to explain how he would change the law, he told a small audience at the historic Château Frontenac that he would modify but not repeal the law, which Conservative incumbent candidate Cheryl Gallant criticized on the weekend.

"No, I think we have dealt enough with that subject," he said, when pressed to say what modifications he would make to the law.

He did not criticize Ms. Gallant, who said the law could shield pedophiles and should be repealed. "What I saw in the comments was simply that the term sexual orientation is legally vague," he said.

Hours later, as he landed in Calgary, he refused again to be specific about how he would alter the

law.

"When we had that debate in Parliament, we proposed several amendments I think the government should have accepted to ensure this law doesn't interfere with the legitimate exercise of freedom. And that's what we'll do."

Mr. Harper repeatedly mentioned the amendments, proposed by his justice critic, Vic Toews.

Mr. Toews explained yesterday that he is concerned that Sunday schools and other religious schools might lose public funds or their charitable status if they were to question the morality of homosexuality in their teachings. The law exempts religious texts from prosecution. But Mr. Toews said the protections need to be bolstered.

"I'm not as worried about the direct prosecution," he said. "I'm more concerned with the indirect attacks on religious organizations such as depriving them of their income-tax exemptions or depriving them of funding for educational institutions."

The bill, C-250, was brought forward by New Democrat MP Svend Robinson, and was passed on Sept 17, 2003. A majority of Canadian Alliance members, including Mr. Harper, voted against it.

Mr. Harper had planned to travel to Victoria and Vancouver yesterday, but the schedule was changed on Sunday so he could come to the Quebec capital to combat negative Liberal ads that ran in two Quebec newspapers on the weekend.

The advertisements in the Quebec City newspaper Le Soleil, and in La Presse, which goes across the province, say that a vote for the Bloc would deliver Quebec to Mr. Harper.

"Well, the ads today say that we would change abortion laws, which is false. They say that we would abolish official bilingualism, which is false," Mr. Harper said.

"They say that I would have sent troops into Iraq, which is false, and they say we would run a government without ministers from Quebec, which is obviously not my wish. That is up to the people from Quebec, and I'm certain that people from Quebec want to see representatives inside the new government of Canada."

He joked that the Liberals would say next that he is for "conscription."



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