

Layton positions himself as king maker

Elizabeth Thompson, Allan Woods and Norma Greenaway

CanWest News Service

Wednesday, January 04, 2006

OSHAWA, Ont. -- With polls showing the Conservatives and Liberals neck and neck heading into the final three weeks of the election campaign, NDP Leader Jack Layton appears to be positioning himself as a power broker -- a man to whom the next prime minister will have to turn to prop up a minority government.

Speaking to reporters on a campaign stop in Oshawa, Layton said if the next government -- whether led by Liberal Paul Martin or Conservative Leader Stephen Harper -- wants the NDP's support, they will have to address a number of issues that Layton says are a priority.

"We want to see action for seniors, we want to see action for young people and kids, we want to see government cleaned up and we want to see our health care system kept public. These are the major thrusts of our campaign and that is what we are asking Canadians for the mandate to pursue in the Parliament and we will pursue those objectives with all of the energy that we are possibly able to put together."

Consequently, Layton is working to get as many New Democrats elected as possible, arguing that it will increase his negotiating clout in the new Parliament -- clout that resulted in the NDP getting the Liberal government to amend its budget to secure NDP support last year.

"At the moment, I'm trying to elect as many New Democrats as possible," he said. "We'll determine what kind of negotiations happen when we see the shape of the House that Canadians construct."

A new poll released Tuesday suggests the Liberals and the Conservatives are in a dead heat nationally with both parties at 35 per cent support. The NDP is the choice of 14 per cent of voters with the Bloc Quebecois tracking nationally at 13 per cent and the Green party holding at four per cent.

The CPAC and SES poll is a national random telephone survey of 1,200 Canadians based on a three-day rolling average completed Dec. 28 to Dec. 30 and is accurate to within 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

The poll echoed a CanWest News Service/Global National poll by Ipsos-Reid released Monday that suggested, 33 per cent of voters would cast their ballots for the Conservatives, up a point from a week ago, while 32 per cent would vote Liberal, down a point. In the key battleground of Ontario, the Liberals fell four points to 36 per cent, giving the Conservatives the edge at 38 per cent.



CREDIT: Tyler Anderson/National Post

Federal New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton gets into his car during a campaign stop at Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario on Tuesday January 3, 2006.

The Liberals held 133 seats in the 308-seat Commons when the government fell November 28. The Tories had 98 seats, the Bloc Quebecois 53 and the NDP 18. There were four Independent MPs and two vacancies.

The final stretch of the election campaign is showing signs of the nastiness of the 2004 battle with Martin describing it as a two-man race and portraying Harper as a political bogeyman, while his political opponents say Martin's attack is little more than a desperate move to draw attention away from his scandal-plagued government.

On Tuesday, the Liberals dusted off a 1994 speech made by Harper calling for less government. The Tory leader, who was a Reform Party MP at the time, was quoted as saying "whether Canada ends up as one national government, or two national governments, or several national governments or some other kind of arrangement is, quite frankly, secondary in my opinion."

Martin told the Canadian Club in Winnipeg that Canada needs a prime minister who sees Canada as a "success." He said the alternative is Harper, who "speaks of how our country comes up short in his eyes."

"One Canada, not two, not several," Martin thundered. "One national government to unite us as Canadians. One prime minister to represent us as Canadians. Not two. Not several."

Opposition parties reacted quickly to Martin's speech, with one Conservative strategist saying that it was "pretty sad" and "rather unbecoming" for a prime minister to take such a negative tone against his chief political opponent. The New Democratic Party called Martin's approach in the address "offensive."

Martin did not mention the NDP in his 25-minute speech, which was delivered in a city where the party holds three seats. Instead, he held up the issue of national unity as a major plank in his campaign, hammering at the Bloc Quebecois as a party stuck in the past and ready to isolate Quebec.

"He has the gall now, when he's in trouble, to suddenly act like he's the protector of Canadians best interests," said Winnipeg NDP MP Judy Wasylycia-Leis. "It's hypocritical and it's offensive because there are three major parties on the ballot and it's not a choice between the Conservatives on the one hand and corruption on the other."

Layton said Martin is desperate.

"They'll say anything, promise anything, knowing full well that they'll ignore their promises the day after the election's over," warning voters not to fall for the prime minister's scare tactics to vote for the Liberals instead of the NDP to block the Conservatives.

Embattled Finance Minister Ralph Goodale met in Regina Tuesday with RCMP officers conducting a criminal investigation into an alleged leak of secret information surrounding the government's decision on the income trust announcement. It is alleged stock speculators may have been given advance warning of the announcement, sending a spike in prices on the stock market.

Goodale's meeting lasted about an hour.

Martin re-iterated that no one from the Prime Minister's Office has been approached for an interview by police investigators and that the probe is simply the result of repeated allegations by opposition parties.

"The fact is that the RCMP has said there is absolutely no evidence underlying it, but they do have a responsibility ... to do their job and that's exactly what they're doing," Martin said.

Tuesday night, Martin announced his government would move to remove a \$975 landing fee charged to immigrants when they arrive in Canada as a way to boost the number of newcomers to the country. Martin made the announcement at a rally in British Columbia, where the Liberals are hoping to win over a number of ridings that are populated by recent Chinese immigrants. The landing fee was imposed by the federal Liberals in 1995 as a way to help eliminate the federal deficit.

The measure will cost an estimated \$210-million annually, but it will take several years before the fee is totally eliminated. A Liberal government would cut the fee immediately to \$600 from \$975, followed by an additional reduction in 2007 to \$300, followed by the complete removal of the charge.

Martin's Liberals are expected today to announce a "patient guarantee" to guarantee waiting times for health-care services. Their plan would provide funding to allow patients to be moved from their home area for treatment if necessary, something Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh said the Liberals would announce when the Tories unveiled a similar plan early in the campaign.

There are two key differences. Harper said patients' direct health costs would be covered by the provinces, while the Liberal plan says the federal government would cover the cost. And while Harper would allow patients to go as far as the United States to get their treatment at public expense, Martin's plan will restrict the travel to within Canada.

The plan is intended to meet the requirements of a Supreme Court of Canada ruling on a Quebec case which deemed long wait times are unacceptable.

Harper reacted Tuesday to comments made by Martin, comparing him to former Ontario premier Mike Harris.

"I'm a different leader at a different level of government, obviously with a different plan and a different era, Harper told reporters while campaigning in Quebec.

Harper was responding to Martin's characterization of him during an interview Monday with CanWest NewsService as someone who would introduce the same kind of right-wing policies as former Ontario premier Mike Harris and leave Canadians to "fend for themselves."

Martin suggested a federal Conservative government would repeat Harris's policy of cutting social programs, cutting taxes and going into deficit.

"If Mr. Martin wants to live in another era, and fight people long retired, that's his prerogative," he said, with a smile and a shrug.

"What I would just point out is that the era Mr. Martin talks about -- 1995 -- this was the era when he was cutting employment insurance, cutting health care, cutting education, cutting all the vital social programs of Canadians."

Harper says he prefers to talk about 2005, but that he wouldn't discourage Martin from talking about the mid-90s.

"If he wants to talk about the other era, I think he's got a lot of explaining to do."

The Bloc Quebecois said Tuesday it will show only "positive" 30-second ads to viewers of 13 French-language television channels for the rest of the election campaign.

"We are positive people," party leader Gilles Duceppe said at a screening of the Bloc's TV ads. "We have faith in Quebec's future and we address our message to the intelligence of the people," Duceppe said.

"I think this is the modern Quebec, the Quebec for all Quebecers without any exception," Duceppe said of the low-key ads. The ads offer a video version of the Bloc's posters, with the slogan, "Heureusement, ici c'est le Bloc." (Fortunately, here it's the Bloc.)

But the Bloc will not be running English versions of its television ads. "It is the common language in Quebec," Duceppe said, explaining why the ads are only in French.

With files from Kevin Dougherty and Elizabeth Thompson (Montreal Gazette)

© CanWest News Service 2006

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.