

## Harper vows to slash immigrant entry fees

Tories would apologize for Chinese head tax

**Norma Greenaway, with files from Elizabeth Thompson and Peter O'Neil**

The Ottawa Citizen

*Thursday, January 05, 2006*

MISSISSAUGA - Stephen Harper says a Conservative government would extend a full apology for the Chinese head tax, ease citizenship rules for children adopted abroad, and slash the long-hated \$975 landing fee imposed on immigrants.

Against the backdrop of a huge Canadian flag and an audience dominated by visible minorities, the Conservative leader also vowed yesterday to try to make it easier for immigrants to have their foreign credentials recognized in Canada.

"New Canadians represent the essence of the Canadian experience, and the Canadian dream," Mr. Harper said, as he praised their strong work ethic, commitment to family, appreciation of education and respect for law and order.

The Conservative plan is to immediately cut the fee in half, and then reduce it to \$100 over its first mandate, at a cost of \$500 million. Mr. Harper said he would be willing to eliminate it completely, but only if it proved affordable.

Mr. Harper's announcement came as a new poll puts his party ahead of the Liberals by the tiniest of margins. According to a tracking poll done by SES for the political cable channel CPAC, the Conservatives have 36-per-cent support, while the Liberals have 33 per cent. With a margin of error of 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, it's almost a tie.

The same poll also has Mr. Harper now tied with Liberal leader Paul Martin as the party leader Canadians think would make the best prime minister.

Yesterday in Mississauga, Mr. Harper's immigration plan was popular with the audience. The reaction of Seejav Sharma of nearby Brampton was typical.

"It's quite a relief," said the fashion show co-ordinator. "It's good. These people (immigrants) need all their money."

Immigrants and their supporters have repeatedly bemoaned the hurdles posed by the complexity of Canada's accreditation system for foreign doctors, engineers and other workers at the same time as the country is experiencing shortages in some fields.

The Conservative platform quoted the Conference Board of Canada as saying the failure to recognize immigrants' education and professional credentials costs new Canadians up to \$5 billion a year in lost earnings.

The Conservative plan also calls for extending automatic citizenship to foreign-born children once their adoption by Canadian parents is finalized.

Mr. Harper also reiterated that he supports a full apology from the government for the contentious Chinese head tax, a scheme under which Chinese paid a total of \$23 million to enter Canada between 1885 and 1923.

He had made the announcement in North Bay earlier in the campaign. Initially, key Conservatives had worried an apology could lead to costly legal claims by Chinese Canadians and other groups who feel they have been subjected to discrimination.

In North Bay, the Tory leader indicated he would leave open the door to financial redress when he said he would attempt to negotiate with all groups.

Mr. Harper also reiterated his support for a public inquiry into the Air India disaster.

Mr. Harper's announcement followed by only hours a move by Liberal leader Paul Martin to shore up Liberal support in multicultural communities.

At a stop in Victoria, Mr. Martin promised a Liberal government would eliminate the \$975 immigration fee over the course of its next mandate.

Mr. Harper ridiculed Mr. Martin's last-minute promise to eliminate the fee, which he brought in as finance minister in 1995. Describing the fee as Mr. Martin's "\$975 welcome mat," Mr. Harper said there have been three federal budgets since Mr. Martin become prime minister in which he could have cut the fee.

"He didn't do it while he had the chance," Mr. Harper said. "I will do it."

Later in the day, Mr. Martin offered his own apology to Chinese-Canadians over the head tax. "As I have said many times, do I regret this? The answer is yes. Do I apologize? Yes," Mr. Martin said in an interview taped in Victoria on Tuesday and broadcast yesterday.

Mr. Martin stressed, however, that his apology doesn't change the government's pre-election position that it would not provide individual compensation for head tax payers, or their survivors, and that the \$2.5 million committed on the issue will be aimed at projects to commemorate the injustice.

"We must recognize what happened and ensure that it never recurs. That's where I think resources should be concentrated. We can't turn back time or make right what happened decades ago."

But if Mr. Harper was smarting over the Liberals' stealing the Tories' thunder on the landing fee, he had his spin ready. Unlike the Liberals, he insisted, the Tory policies were not made up on the run, and rushed out in a bid to pre-empt a rival's announcement.

The Winter Campaign. Three Points Up: Poll confirms conservative gains, page A6

© The Ottawa Citizen 2006

CLOSE WINDOW