

Abortion Issue Flares on Canadian Campaign Trail

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By Paul Willcocks

VICTORIA, British Columbia (Reuters) - Abortion returned to the fore in Canada's election campaign on Tuesday, as Conservative leader Stephen Harper stood by a candidate who likened the procedure to American Nicholas Berg's beheading in Iraq.

Harper, in British Columbia's capital campaigning for the June 28 election, defended Conservative legislator Cheryl Gallant, who made the comments at an anti-abortion rally in Ottawa a few weeks ago.

Gallant is a "very, very strong pro-life MP" who has the right to her views, Harper said. "These kind of statements are used by the pro-life people ... I don't think that they're particularly effective."

Harper promised that a Conservative government would not introduce any legislation limiting abortion, which has been legal without restriction in Canada since 1988. However, he has said he would allow a free vote in the House of Commons if a private member of Parliament introduced such a bill.

Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, who began a two-day break from the campaign to attend the G8 summit in the United States, hammered the Conservatives on the issue, saying Harper should have condemned Gallant's comments.

"I don't think those words were appropriate in any way, shape or form," Martin said.

The Liberals have recently seized on abortion and gay rights issues to argue the Conservatives are extremists on social issues, but polls indicate their political fortunes continue to sag.

A small daily tracking poll by SES Canada Research found support for the Conservatives had climbed one percentage point from Monday to 35 percent. The Liberals slipped one point to 31 percent. The left-leaning New Democrats fell 4 points to 16 percent.

The survey of only 600 people is much smaller than traditional polls of 1,000 or more, but is considered to be accurate to within 4.1 percentage points 19 times out of 20.

Harper noted the Liberals also have members who are strongly opposed to abortion, and he accused his opponents of raising the issue to distract voters.

Martin told reporters on the flight to the G8 summit in Sea Island, Georgia, that "a gulf" was beginning to open between himself and Harper on issues ranging from the deficit to human rights.

But the Liberal campaign -- which has seen the party's popularity slide in the wake of a government spending scandal -- came under fire from within the party on Tuesday when Jean Pelletier, a chief of staff for former Prime Minister Jean Chretien, threatened to sue a key Martin supporter.

Public Workers Minister Stephen Owen accused the Chretien government last week of "political involvement at the highest levels" in the patronage scandal, which saw millions of sponsorship dollars go to ad agencies with close ties to the Liberals.

"I understand that in the context of an election campaign, careless words may be spoken. I also understand that when a game plan

goes wrong, people tend to look for scapegoats to blame their campaign missteps upon," Pelletier said.

Martin sidestepped a question about Pelletier's comments, saying questions of blame in the sponsorship scandal should be address within an ongoing judicial inquiry.

(Additional reporting by Randall Palmer in Savannah, Georgia, David Ljunggren in Ottawa)

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