

Harper defends firewall manifesto

Conservative leader says Alberta autonomy more important than ever

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The rationale for a legislative firewall around Alberta is stronger now than when first proposed because of the Liberals' track record, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper suggested Friday.

Harper, who signed a controversial manifesto four years ago calling on Alberta to assert and expand its provincial authority in several areas, added that the re-election of a Liberal government "certainly won't help" alleviate the feelings of frustration that Albertans continue to feel toward Ottawa.

"I think, obviously, Alberta will be a lot more comfortable with the way the federal government's evolving if we elect a Conservative government," he said.

"I think probably most Canadians, including Albertans, have less confidence in the federal government to deal with their money and their affairs today than they did four years ago."

Later, in an evening speech to about 600 raucous supporters in Calgary, Harper hit on the theme of Alberta's autonomy to a clearly receptive audience.

Blaming the Liberals for "coming here every four years and feeding us Pablum," he said he would enact Senate reform, the first stage of which would be to appoint Alberta's two senators-in-waiting, Ted Morton and Bert Brown.

The two were elected in the late-1990s.

Earlier in the day, Harper accused Prime Minister Paul Martin of being more willing to criticize provincial autonomy in English Canada than he is in Quebec.

"Nobody's ever disputed that these are a constitutional jurisdiction of the provinces. Mr. Martin's only problem seems to be when he's speaking English ... he has extreme difficulty with Alberta exercising these, and when he's speaking French, he seems to forget that Quebec already exercises many (of the same jurisdictions)."

During and since the recent federal election, we have been among a large number of Albertans discussing the future of our province. We were not dismayed by the outcome of the election so much as by the strategy employed by the federal government to secure its re-election.

In our view, the Chretien government undertook a series of attacks not merely designed to defeat its partisan opponents, but to marginalize Alberta and Albertans within Canada's political system.

One well-documented incident was the attack against Alberta's health-care system. To your credit, you vehemently protested the unprecedented attack as the federal government launched against Alberta's policies -- policies the prime minister had previously found no fault with.

However, while your protest was necessary and appreciated by Albertans, we believe it is not enough to respond only with protests. If the government in Ottawa concludes that Alberta is a soft target, we will be subjected to much worse than dishonest television ads.

The prime minister has already signalled as much by announcing his so-called "tough love" campaign for the West.

We believe the time has come for Albertans to take greater charge of our own future. This means resuming control of the powers that we possess under the Constitution of Canada but that we have allowed the federal government to exercise. Intelligent use of these powers will help Alberta build a prosperous future despite a misguided and increasingly hostile government in Ottawa.

Under the heading of the "Alberta Agenda," we propose our province move forward on the following fronts:

CANADA PENSION PLAN

1. Withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan to create an Alberta Pension Plan offering the same benefits at lower cost while giving Alberta control over the investment fund. Pensions are a provincial responsibility under Section 94A of the Constitution Act, 1867; and the legislation setting up the Canada Pension Plan permits a province to run its own plan, as Quebec has done from the beginning. If Quebec can do it, why not Alberta?

INCOME TAX

2. Collect our own revenue from personal income tax, as we already do for corporate income tax. Now that your government has made the historic innovation of the single-rate personal income tax, there is no reason to have Ottawa collect our revenue. Any incremental cost of collecting our own personal income tax would be far outweighed by the policy flexibility Alberta would gain, as Quebec's experience has shown.

POLICING

3. Start preparing to let the contract with the RCMP run out in 2012 and create an Alberta provincial police force. Alberta is a major province. Like the other major provinces of Ontario and Quebec, we should have our own provincial police force. We have no doubt Alberta can run a more efficient and effective police force than Ottawa can -- one that will not be misused as a laboratory for experiments in social engineering.

HEALTH CARE

4. Resume provincial responsibility for health-care policy. If Ottawa objects to provincial policy, fight in the courts. If we lose, we can afford the financial penalties Ottawa might try to impose under the Canada Health Act. Albertans deserve better than the long waiting periods and technological backwardness that are rapidly coming to characterize Canadian medicine. Alberta should also argue that each province should raise its own revenue for health care -- i.e., replace Canada Health and Social Transfer cash with tax points, as Quebec has argued for many years. Poorer provinces would continue to rely on equalization to ensure they have adequate revenues.

SENATE REFORM

5. Use Section 88 of the Supreme Court's decision in the Quebec Secession Reference to force Senate reform back on to the national agenda. Our reading of that decision is that the federal government and other provinces must seriously consider a proposal for constitutional reform endorsed by "a clear majority on a clear question" in a provincial referendum. You acted decisively once before to hold a senatorial election. Now is the time to drive the issue further.

All these steps can be taken using the constitutional powers Alberta possesses. In addition, we believe it is imperative for you to take all possible political and legal measures to reduce the

financial drain on Alberta caused by Canada's tax and transfer system. The most recent Alberta Treasury estimates are that Albertans transfer \$2,600 per capita annually to other Canadians, for a total outflow from our province approaching \$8 billion a year. The same federal politicians who accuse us of not sharing their "Canadian values" have no compunction about appropriating our Canadian dollars to buy votes elsewhere in the country.

Mr. Premier, we acknowledge the constructive reforms your government made in the 1990s -- balancing the budget, paying down the provincial debt, privatizing government services, getting Albertans off welfare and into jobs, introducing a single-rate tax, pulling government out of the business of subsidizing business, and many other beneficial changes.

But no government can rest on its laurels. As economic slowdown, and perhaps even recession, threatens North America, the government in Ottawa will be tempted to take advantage of Alberta's prosperity, to redistribute income from Alberta to residents of other provinces in order to keep itself in power. It is imperative to take the initiative, to build firewalls around Alberta, to limit the extent to which an aggressive and hostile federal government can encroach upon legitimate provincial jurisdiction.

Once Alberta's position is secured, only our imagination will limit the prospects for extending the reform agenda your government undertook eight years ago. To cite only a few examples, lower taxes will unleash the energies of the private sector; easing conditions for charter schools will help individual freedom and initiative improve public education; and greater use of the referendum and initiative will bring Albertans into closer touch with their own government.

The precondition for the success of this Alberta Agenda is the exercise of all our legitimate provincial jurisdictions under the Constitution of Canada. Starting to act now will secure the future for all Albertans.

THE WRITERS:

- Stephen Harper, president, National Citizens' Coalition
- Tom Flanagan, professor of political science and former director of research, Reform party
- Ted Morton, professor of political science and Alberta senator-elect
- Rainer Knopff, professor of political science
- Andrew Crooks, chairman, Canadian Taxpayers Federation
- Ken Boessenkool, former policy adviser to former Alberta treasurer Stockwell Day

TORIES DEFEND HARPER'S TALK OF PROVINCIAL POWERS

Harper and several other Western intellectuals authored the "Alberta Agenda" after the Jean Chretien government won a third consecutive majority. "It is imperative to take the initiative, to build firewalls around Alberta, to limit the extent to which an aggressive and hostile federal government can encroach upon legitimate provincial jurisdiction," the document read.

Drafted in January 2001, it called on Alberta to withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan, collect the province's share of income tax, create a provincial police force, hold a referendum on Senate reform and forge ahead with health reforms even if they violated the Canada Health Act.

Liberals seized Friday on Harper's refusal to distance himself from the "firewall" concept. "I just think it is not acceptable for a national leader to be talking about building walls between people," said Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan. "It was bad enough when he said it three years ago."

But Conservative candidates defended their leader.

"I don't know what we're so afraid of discussing and debating provincial powers that other provincial governments already currently exercise," Edmonton-Leduc candidate James Rajotte said. "Instead of ignoring it and alienating people even more, it's healthy to discuss what Alberta's place should be within Confederation."

Rahim Jaffer, the candidate for Edmonton-Strathcona, agreed. Quebec exercises its jurisdiction in many of those areas without being accused of surrounding itself with a firewall, he said.

"I think that if one province has that... it should be extended to other provinces as well."

Harper also moved Friday to stamp out a potential firestorm touched off by comments from Scott Reid, the Conservative language critic.

Reid resigned his post late Thursday after a newspaper interview where he suggested a Tory government would impose sharp restrictions in Canada's official bilingualism policy.

Martin accused Harper of rekindling the national unity crisis of almost two decades ago in his refusal to clearly state that he supports both official bilingualism and minority language rights.

He also turned up the volume on Harper during a rally in Surrey on Thursday night when he accused him of having a "hidden agenda," the same allegation former prime minister Jean Chretien's government successfully made against Stockwell Day in the 2000 election.

Harper acknowledged Reid "made a mistake, a bad mistake in getting off onto his personal views... in the middle of an election campaign," adding that he accepted Reid's resignation as language critic "to make the party's position absolutely clear."

WHAT WAS SAID

Reporter: "You're going to Alberta and I'm just wondering if you're willing to stand by the firewall as the solution to provincial grievances."

Harper: "These are, you know, as I pointed out when we had the outrage against the Liberal government after the last election because of the way Alberta was treated, I pointed out, along with others, to Albertans that rather than just complain about the federal government, they can exercise more authority in their own jurisdictions. These are jurisdictions that are exercised by some provinces already, and could be exercised by Alberta and the others. My point to be made today, or I guess later today and tomorrow, is that we now have an opportunity to change the federal government in a way that I think would make Albertans much more comfortable about the direction this country's headed."

Reporter: "So you're standing behind the firewall letter, right?"

Harper: "Well, nobody's ever disputed that these are constitutional jurisdictions of the provinces. Mr. Martin's only problem seems to be when he's speaking English, he has a difficulty, would have some extreme difficulty with Alberta exercising these and when he's speaking French, he seems to forget that Quebec already exercises most of these authorities."

Ran with fact boxes "Tories Defend Harper's Talk of Provincial Powers" and "What Was Said", which have been appended to this story.

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