

Party leaders trot out promises as election nears

By HELENA ZHU
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Conservatives: Seniors income supplement and research

Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Wednesday that his government, if re-elected, would carry on with its budget commitment to strengthen its support for seniors.

The Conservatives plan to increase the monthly Guaranteed Income Supplement for low-income Canadian seniors and provide additional benefits of up to \$600 for each single senior and \$840 for couples.

"Canada's seniors helped build this country for future generations," Harper said in a release. "Our seniors deserve a secure and dignified retirement that recognizes the contributions they have made."

Harper noted that the Conservatives' plan includes an additional investment of \$300 million per year in seniors is affordable without raising taxes.

The plan also features creating jobs through training, trade, and low taxes; eliminating the deficit by 2014-2015 by controlling spending and cutting waste; making the streets safer through new laws to protect the elderly and children; cracking down on human smuggling; strengthening the Canadian Armed Forces; and developing Canada's North.

Harper said his government would invest \$100 million to establish the Canada Brain Research Fund to support brain research and neuroscience, as one in three Canadians are affected by brain disorders.

The Conservatives are also dedicated to improving the process to speed up the deportation of serious foreign criminals and terrorists from Canada, as well as working with its private sector and territorial partners to connect the nation's highway system from coast to coast to coast, as a year-round highway link to the Arctic coastline will "support economic development in the territories and strengthen Canada's sovereignty."

LIBERALS: HEALTH CARE REFORM AND SOCIAL PROGRAMS

In the last two weeks before the May 2 general election, the Liberals are striving hard to win votes from families.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, a believer of universal public health care, said that if the Liberals secure the government, they would convene a First Ministers meeting within 60 days after being sworn in to start new funding arrangements and

system-wide health care reforms.

"Health care must never depend on your wallet or your postal code," Ignatieff tweeted on Monday. "We're committed to health for Northern and rural communities."

Ignatieff said he is committed to a sustained 6 percent annual increase in health care funding as a "foundation for crucial reforms," with the two core priorities being home care (reducing hospital costs and increasing health care quality) and drug coverage (increasing accessibility and reducing the cost of prescription drugs).

Health care has been the top issue in polls since the election campaign began in the end of March. The Liberals are questioning whether a re-elected Conservative government would have enough money to pay for projected Medicare funding increases.

In addition to health care reforms, the Liberals are promising a "Family Pack" of five programs to help Canadians without raising taxes. They include a "Learning Passport" of \$4,000 - \$6,000 for college or university students; a fund for early childhood education; tax credits and other support for Canadians caring for elderly or ill family members (the Conservatives promised similar tax credits); stronger public pensions; and a green renovation tax credit.

NEW DEMOCRATS: FARMERS AND CONSUMERS

New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton announced his support for farmers on Wednesday while visiting a farm in Essex, Ontario.

The NDP strategy will give enhanced supports for local producers and ensure Canada's supply of food is healthy and safe via a food safety component. The plan also includes help for young farmers through skill training and mentorship programs.

"My plan will reverse years of neglect, fix income stability programs, and give farmers the support they need to thrive and grow," Layton said in a release.

In addition to supporting farmers, Layton advocates for investment in clean energy sources to replace the Conservatives' multi-billion-dollar fossil fuel subsidies.

Layton's campaign also supports training and hiring more doctors and nurses; doubling public pensions and offering Canadians more choice over their retirement savings; give businesses a 2 percent point tax cut; cap credit card fees; give consumers control over cell phone bills; and abolishing the Harmonized Sales Tax, a key political issue in British Columbia.



UNICEF Canada is urging all party leaders and candidates to make children's well-being and rights a priority issue during the election campaign. PAUL J.RICHARDS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

UNICEF urges candidates to make children a priority

By HELENA ZHU
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VANCOUVER—UNICEF Canada is urging all party leaders and candidates to make children's well-being and rights a priority issue during the election campaign.

UNICEF notes that children comprise almost a quarter of Canada's population, yet their voices are rarely heard in national politics.

The organization is asking all candidates to sign its new Charter for Children, which outlines major priorities that will improve the well-being of children. The charter was sent to every party leader and federal election candidate, asking for their formal support.

"Currently, there is no one in the federal government with the primary responsibility to consider the well-being of Canada's children," David Morley, UNICEF Canada's

president and CEO, said in a release.

"There is no minister for children, no children's commissioner, no parliamentary children's caucus or committee to ensure the impacts on children are considered in legislation, policy and services."

Many countries, including England, Scotland, and Sweden, have an independent national children's commissioner who helps to ensure decisions are made in consideration of children.

UNICEF's Charter for Children outlines six priorities for the candidates, the first being "pay attention" to issues affecting children and advocate for the appointment of an independent or parliamentary voice for children in the absence of a mandated national children's advocate or commissioner in the federal government.

With Canada having one of the largest income gaps between rich and poor children among developed countries, UNICEF

is asking the candidates to give children the "best start" by closing the child poverty gap in Canada.

The charter also calls on the federal and provincial governments to make their expenditures for children transparent, as UNICEF notes that it is unclear if money spent is sufficient or effective.

UNICEF is also asking the candidates to close the gap in life chances for aboriginal children, do Canada's "fair share" for children in developing countries, and increase investment for maternal, newborn, and child health as part of a global effort to save lives.

With the federal election coming up on May 2, UNICEF says it will continue to reach out to candidates and Canadians to ask them to become "champions" for Canadian children.

Visit www.unicef.ca/vote2011 for responses by party leaders and candidates.

Outcry heard but not heeded as Vancouver passes controversial bylaw

BYLAW CONTINUED FROM A1

Councillors voted 6-4 to approve the revised bylaw covering protest structures after a marathon meeting on Tuesday that went until midnight.

"There is no other choice, we have to go back to the court to let the court judge the bylaw," said Sue Zhang of the Vancouver Falun Dafa Association.

Falun Gong maintained a 24-hour protest vigil outside the Chinese consulate in Vancouver 365 days a year to protest torture and persecution in China. Though the city found the protest was not a disturbance, it was an embarrassment to the Chinese consulate, which pressured the city to have it removed.

The vigil depended on a small hut to shelter protesters, many of whom were elderly Chinese women, from the rain, snow and night chill. Falun Gong practitioners have said they are willing to submit to rules that would ensure the safety of passersby and a reasonable size of hut,

but that requiring them to remove the hut every day between 8 p.m. And 8 a.m., and for a month at a time—as the new bylaw now does—would essentially end their vigil.

They argue the bylaw also runs counter to a ruling by the BC Court of Appeal telling the city to draft a bylaw that did not restrict Falun Gong practitioners' right to expression. The court ordered the city to redraft the original bylaw saying that its previous restrictions were unconstitutional, and found that the group's protest structures outside the Chinese consulate were fundamental to their freedom of expression.

Zhang said despite widespread criticism of the bylaw, it appeared city councillors had already made their decision to approve it before the public hearing had started on Tuesday.

"Very, very disappointing. The city held that long public meeting, and public opinion was so clear. At the

end of the day—what's the public opinion hearing for?"

Councillors stayed late in order to meet a court ordered deadline to come up with a new bylaw by April 19 and to hear public comments on the revisions.

COPE councillor David Cadman, who was strongly opposed to passing the bylaw, said if the city goes back to court he "guarantees" they will lose again. He criticized city staff for consulting the Chinese Consulate in the making of the bylaw, before giving it to council at the final hour, with less than 2 weeks to review it.

"I don't think this is going to pass... And it's more money down the drain as we try and fight a charter provision, which is national and pervasive, through a street bylaw. It simply is not going to stand the test at court," he warned council members.

Many at Tuesday's meeting spoke against the bylaw, whose requirements include removing protest

structures between 8 p.m. and 8 a.m., removing structures every 30 days, and fines of \$1000-\$5000 for violations.

Mayor Gregor Robertson emphasized the precedent the new bylaw set in permitting protest structures, saying it is a first in Canada.

But legal representation for the Falun Gong, Clive Ansley, argues that the city is trying to frame the bylaw as a precedent for free expression while hiding the fact that it removes many previous freedoms for protesters.

"They're entirely turning the situation on its head. Before this bylaw was passed, what we had in every jurisdiction in North America is constitutionally protected free speech—those freedoms all existed already. What we've got now is a bylaw that very severely restricts the only open ended freedom we've had before."

An outcry erupted recently when the city revealed it had consulted the Chinese authorities as a "stakeholder" in the draft bylaw, which banned protest structures in front of the consulate. Under scrutiny, the city made revisions to the bylaw to allow such structures, but the restrictions would still put an end to the Falun Gong vigil, says the group. Ansley said the refusal of the

city to honour the court's decision, which he sees as an attempt to satisfy the Chinese consulate, means the issue will again end up in court.

"Passage of this draft will guarantee another lawsuit and further squandering of taxpayer money on a cause which benefits only the Chinese Communist Party and the Consulate-General which represents the Chinese Communist Party in Canada. Although well disguised and designed to obscure the real effect of the new bylaw, this draft effectively amounts to a prohibition of the Falun Gong vigil," he said.

Robertson said, however, that the city has found a "balance" and complied with the Court of Appeal's instructions to regulate protest structures.

"Collectively we've done a very reasonable job of moving this forward," he said.

The BC Civil Liberties Association also opposes the new bylaw, saying it violates rights and is unconstitutional. The organization said it will be "bringing or joining" a court case against the city in response to the bylaw's approval.

"This situation smacks of the hasty passage of the controversial Olympics anti-free speech bylaws. Citizens should not have to file lawsuits

in order to get the City of Vancouver to properly consider the constitutionality of its bylaws," BCCLA president Rob Holmes said in a statement.

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