

Harper on defensive in final election week as he defends plans for Air Canada

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HOLYROOD, Nfld. (CP) - Stephen Harper entered the final week of the federal election campaign on the defensive, denying reports that a Conservative government would scrap the requirement for Air Canada to operate in both official languages.

"That's not true," the Tory leader told reporters Sunday following a rally in this community west of St. John's. The Conservatives would scrap the Air Canada Public Participation Act, he said, but then place the airline - and all others - under the terms of the Official Languages Act, which sets out much stricter requirements for bilingual services than the federal Transport Act currently governing the air industry.

Harper said by making all airlines comply with official languages legislation, it would even the playing field.

It was the second time in less than a week that Harper was forced to answer to an agenda driven by his opponents, after a finely tuned campaign in which Harper was mostly on the attack.

On Friday, Harper was faced with demand for apologies from both Prime Minister Paul Martin and NDP Leader Jack Layton after his office sent out news releases suggesting the two support child pornography.

The release targeting Martin was retracted and replaced with a milder version. Over-caffeinated youngsters in the party war room were blamed although never named.

The last week of campaigning is a critical time for Harper, who had so far managed to muzzle gaffe-prone candidates and avoid the kind of unfortunate public appearances political history is made of.

Harper kept his cool under questioning about his plans for Air Canada.

He had a little help in Newfoundland from Tory stalwart John Crosbie, the tart-tongued former cabinet minister once opposed to merging the Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance parties.

Crosbie told about 200 supporters who turned out in the riding held by Natural Resources Minister John Efford that the Liberals are trying to create hysteria and conspiracies "because the poor devils are desperate."

The salty former politician, who considered and then decided against a political comeback in the riding where Efford is widely expected to be re-elected, called Martin a "berserk Bugs Bunny. . . his nose twitching as he lies exaggerates, conjures up hidden agendas."

"Having screwed his own leader, he's attempting to screw ours," Crosbie told the crowd.

Two recent polls put the Conservatives slightly ahead of the Liberals.

An Ipsos-Reid poll put the Conservatives at 32 per cent and the Liberals at 29. The poll has a margin of error of 3.1 per cent.

A Ekos poll with a margin of error of 3.3 per cent put the Tories at 31.4 per cent and the Liberals at 29.

Harper said the battleground for the remainder of the campaign will be in Liberal ridings.

"We're feeling more and more confident about most of the seats we hold now and I think the Liberals are in danger of losing their seats, which is why not just I am in Liberal ridings, but why Mr. Martin is also spending his time in Liberal ridings."

Harper was to head for seat-rich Ontario on Monday, where his Martin and Layton were also to begin the week.



Conservative leader Stephen Harper walks off his Air Canada aircraft in St. John's, Nfld. on Sunday. (CP/Frank Gunn)