

Top Alberta Liberal rejects firewall

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Building firewalls is a "hostile" activity ill-suited to an Alberta that is brimming with confidence and economic power, Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan said Saturday.

Responding to Conservative Leader Stephen Harper's suggestion that legislative firewalls are more necessary now than when he advocated them three years ago, McLellan said most Albertans want to drive the national agenda rather than withdraw from it.

"Firewalls are about a very negative and hostile concept in terms of what a province might want to do in relation to its neighbours," she told reporters. "It's about dividing. It's about separation. It's a concept of some hostility as far as I'm concerned, whereas I think most Albertans are saying it's time for us to take the national agenda and drive it. We have got this sense of confidence. We've got economic power."

Building walls between Alberta and the rest of the country runs counter to the province's efforts to reach out to the rest of Canada, she added.

"Ever since the time of (former premier) Peter Lougheed, this province has been an enormously outward-looking place, understanding its future is with the rest of the country and the rest of the world."

Harper and five other Albertans signed an open letter to Premier Ralph Klein in 2001 calling for the building of "firewalls" to limit the extent "an aggressive and hostile federal government can encroach upon legitimate provincial jurisdiction."

The letter called for Alberta to withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan, pursue its own health care policies, even if they run counter to the Canada Health Act, create a provincial police force, and kickstart Senate reform. Harper was president of the National Citizens' Coalition when he signed it.

When questioned Friday about whether he still stands by the letter, Harper said Canadians and Albertans have even less confidence in the Liberals than when it was first written.

He said there's no dispute the agenda it sets out is within provincial control and suggested Prime Minister Paul Martin is willing to let Quebec flex its muscles but doesn't approve of Alberta following a similar course.

"I don't know where that comes from," McLellan said, noting that each province makes its own decisions about whether to have a provincial police force rather than rely on the RCMP or



Alberta has a history of reaching out to the rest of Canada, says Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan.

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whether to allow the federal government to collect income taxes on its behalf.

University of Calgary political scientist David Taras said the firewall agenda is a "very powerful card" to play in Alberta and may garner Harper support in Quebec, which shares an interest in expanding provincial jurisdiction. But Taras said there are risks in pursuing an agenda that would diminish Ottawa's authority.

"He opens himself up to the criticism that he's going to emasculate the federal government, that it will be a buffet table where the premiers just load up their plates on all the powers they want and leave nothing on the table," Taras said.

"I think it's dangerous ground because, ultimately, Canadians do want to see Ottawa have real power. I think they want a government that can really do things, that can really affect their lives, that can stand up in terms of health care or for human rights or for cities."

McLellan said Harper's promise to appoint Ted Morton and Bert Brown -- Alberta's senators-in-waiting -- to the upper house would not do anything for Senate reform. She would rather see discussion centre around changing the entire upper house, perhaps by instituting elections based on proportional representation.

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