

ONLINE NEWS FROM THE CANADIAN PRESS

Federal green fund boosts Quebec Liberals ahead of expected election

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SHERBROOKE, Que. (CP) - Prime Minister Stephen Harper stopped by Premier Jean Charest's home riding Monday to hand the provincial leader a weapon for his election arsenal, in the form of \$350 million in funding to fight greenhouse gas emissions.

The funding is part of a nationwide program aimed at helping provinces and territories reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants.

It is also a major boost for Quebec's federalist Liberals heading into a provincial election campaign largely expected to start next week. One of Charest's campaign themes is expected to be the environment.

Charest was coy about the timing of Monday's announcement, which took place in his home town.

"We're in the fourth year of the mandate and eventually we will have an election campaign and when it'll be announced, it'll be announced," he told reporters.

"You never know what will happen."

Harper, who tucked his \$1.5 billion environment fund into the upcoming federal budget, was equally coy.

"I don't know anything about the Quebec plans," he told reporters. "On our side, we have no plans to call an election."

But Harper made it clear the delivery of the money is contingent on passing the federal budget. By making the environmentally friendly announcement in Quebec, Harper is warning both the Bloc Quebecois and the Liberals that they would have to answer to Quebec voters if they bring down his Conservative government on the budget.

Harper also said the people of Quebec will ultimately decide who runs their government, but the two leaders, who both need to woo Quebec voters, touted their federal-provincial record over the past year.

"All I would say today, and reiterate, is that the government of Quebec and the current federal government have worked together very productively," he told reporters.

"You're not going to be surprised to hear that, as the Prime Minister of Canada, I think it's helpful to Quebec and the entire country if our efforts are focused on working together and dealing with the real challenges the confront the province and the country, rather than spending all our energies fighting over a referendum."

The Liberals were elected in April 2003 and Charest can wait until next year to call an election, but many observers expect the writ will be dropped by the end of the month.

The provincial Liberals' environmental record, and the decision to stick to Kyoto targets despite federal abandonment of the plan, is expected to play a major part of their re-election campaign.

Earlier this month the provincial Liberals started running a series of radio ads in French and English touting their record on the environment, as well as healthcare and education.

Parti Quebecois Leader Andre Boisclair dismissed the multimillion-dollar announcement as "hypothetical."

"He himself says that the sums will come from the next federal budget, which has neither been tabled in the House of Commons, nor adopted by MPs," Boisclair said of Harper.

"In summation, all this comes from improvisation."

Later Monday, Harper addressed a group of supporters in Trois-Rivieres, Que., where he extolled his government's record after a year in office.

He said it has successfully followed a course of open federalism that has paid off for Quebec, much to the chagrin of the Bloc Quebecois.

Harper said Quebecers are a nation now because of their hard work in building the country, not because of sovereignty.

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