

Tories wouldn't outlaw abortion, Harper says

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Conservative Leader [Stephen Harper](#) says his party has no intention of passing new abortion laws if the Tories form the next government.

At a campaign stop in Whitby, Ont., Tuesday, the Tory Leader also said that while his personal views on the controversial issue are "in-between the two extremes" he has "no intention of discussing the topic during an election."

Mr. Harper was trying to steer clear of an issue that has tripped up a former Canadian Alliance party in the past, saying that a Conservative government would not table abortion legislation.

"It will not be sponsoring a referendum on that matter, the matter of those kinds of services are delivered are within the provincial jurisdiction."

Mr. Harper was responding to questions on abortion a day after his health critic, [Rob Merrifield](#), suggested a proposal that women seek a procedure independent, third-party counselling.

Mr. Harper suggested Mr. Merrifield went slightly "off message" on the platform by suggesting that women get counselling before abortions.

"A leader of a party can go off message, I suppose any member of a party can. We know it's a sensitive issue...and I urge people to exercise caution in a campaign about what they want to communicate to the public in their party position," he said, in what appeared to be a warning to his health critic.

The Tory Leader was in Whitby, Ont., announcing his party's justice platform, but at least half the questions after his speech were about Mr. Merrifield's comments on abortion.

Mr. Merrifield said that women considering terminating their pregnancies should have third-party, independent counselling prior to undergoing the procedures, saying it would be "valuable" to women who may only be seeing one side of the issue. He did not specify whether counselling should be done by a doctor.

Mr. Harper said his health critic's comments were Mr. Merrifield's opinion, and did not reflect the Conservative Party platform.

However, later in the day, Liberal MP Anne McLellan, who called the remarks "patronizing and unacceptable," called on Mr. Harper to strip Mr. Merrifield of his responsibilities as health critic if he wasn't representing the Conservative stance on the issue.

"If that is not this party's position, then Stephen Harper I think has no choice but to strip Rob Merrifield of his critic's position," she said.

Carolyn Bennett, Liberal minister for public health, said that Mr. Merrifield's comments surrounding abortion demonstrate the party's true colours.

"I just think that it's the social conservative agenda that comes out again," Ms. Bennett said in an interview with Canadian Press.

"We just wondered how long they could keep the sheep's clothing on." She accused Mr. Merrifield of wanting to interfere with a hard-won right to choose.

"It's frightening to women that this is being discussed, as though somebody is going to try to tell them what to do and how to do it."

While the party's platform has not yet been fully released, Mr. Harper's position on abortion is that he would not bring forward any changes to the law. However, if a backbencher pressed the issue, he would allow a free vote.

One reporter asked specifically about a vote, questioning the Tory Leader on how he would

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respond if one of his MPs brought forward a private members' bill to cut funding for abortion.

"I would oppose that. I think health-care money should go to the provinces for them to decide how to run a health care system," he said.

Mr. Harper said it's up to the provinces to decide how abortion services are administered. Federally, the country has been without an abortion law since the Supreme Court struck down the existing law in 1998. A replacement bill died in the Senate in 1992.

Pro-choice advocates were quick to slam Mr. Merrifield's proposal Monday, saying it would create a hurdle to women's access to abortions, while activists against abortion welcomed the idea.

Mr. Harper also said that Mr. Merrifield's comments differed from those of Conservative MP Scott Reid, who resigned as the party's official-languages critic last week after going against the party line by saying he favoured cuts to services for minority language groups.

He said they were similar to comments that Liberal Leader Paul Martin made this week on abortion.

At a Saskatoon Catholic school on Monday, Mr. Martin was asked in answer to a question on how to stop the lives lost by abortions each year.

He clarified how he answered the question during a campaign stop in Vancouver Tuesday.

"I expressed my views at a high school yesterday. It is quite natural if you are in a high school, [and] a young woman asks you about this, you should refer [her] to counselling.

"My view is that it's a woman's right to choose," the Liberal Leader said.

Mr. Harper said Mr. Merrifield merely said he had a preference to see consulting on abortion before it occurs.

With reports from Jill Mahoney and Canadian Press

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