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May 30, 2002

Harper calls Canada a nation of defeatists, defends remark about easterners

LOUISE ELLIOTT

Canadian Press

OTTAWA (CP) - Alliance Leader Stephen Harper called Canada a nation of defeatists on Wednesday as he defended his remark that the woes of Atlantic Canada are linked to a pervasive "can't-do" attitude. Harper said there is a "culture of defeat" not just in the eastern provinces, but on the Canadian prairies and among some Quebecers.



"In parts of the prairies we're increasingly seeing similar views - there is no hope, there is no way forward, and all we can do is kind of negotiate with the party in power," he said.

"I think any region where you have sustained underdevelopment or lack of growth for a long period of time, this starts to develop."

Harper then went one step further, calling defeatism a "general problem" among Canadians.

"Generally the kind of can't-do attitude is a problem in this country," he said.

"I think this whole country . . . should be leapfrogging the United States and there's too many people in this country think that we can't do it.

"This should be the wealthiest country in the world, not a country with a living standard that's 25 per cent lower. So obviously the growth and the attitudes that go with that are different in some parts of the country than others, but it's a general problem."

Alliance Leader Stephen Harper called Canada a nation of defeatists on Wednesday as he defended his remark that the woes of Atlantic Canada are linked to a pervasive "can't-do" attitude. (CP /Fred Chartrand)

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Harper said he comes from an "eighth-generation Canadian family that's left the Maritimes because there's no growth."

He argued Tuesday in a newspaper interview that his party's biggest stumbling block to a breakthrough in Atlantic Canada was the "can't-do attitude," fostered by years of federal transfer payments and industry handouts.

Rather than toning down his argument Wednesday by expanding it, Harper appeared to ratchet up the rhetoric, saying Atlantic politicians outraged by his remarks don't understand their own constituents.

"Frankly, they're out of touch with their own people if they don't think that there isn't a lot more that could be done to get people more optimistic in that part of the country," he said.

"Atlantic Canada can be as wealthy as any other region but that needs to be pursued aggressively and we don't sit around waiting for favours from government . . ."

He said the Alliance would put an end to federal handouts, and that - combined with low taxation and less regulation - would help "have-not" regions flourish.

Other federal leaders also jumped on the remarks Wednesday, saying Harper was being irresponsible by perpetuating stereotypes.

"You know, the more things change, the more they stay the same with the Alliance party," said NDP Leader Alexa McDonough.

"This is the real Stephen Harper who wanted to put up firewalls around Alberta to keep those nasty eastern Canadians out because we're ne'er-do-wells and we're lazy bums . . . They've just got it dead wrong.

Tory Leader Joe Clark said the comments were uncalled for.

"It's just an irresponsible thing for a national political leader to say," he said.

"Atlantic Canadians are not defeatist and certainly the people of Saskatchewan are not. Mr. Harper, all of us, should be very careful not to apply false caricatures to people or parts of the country."

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