

## Harper lures moms and dads with \$1,200 baby bonus promise



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OTTAWA (CP) - Stephen Harper is hoping the lure of a baby bonus bonanza will win over stay-at-home moms and working parents alike.

The Conservative leader and his promise-packing roadshow rolled into Week 2 of the election campaign with the latest in a string of announcements: the Tories would give families \$1,200 a year for each child under age six - on top of current child benefits.

It's a tactic aimed largely at appealing to single-income families who don't stand to benefit from the Liberal day-care plan. Such voters could turn the electoral tide in tight races, especially in the suburban battlegrounds of southern Ontario.

The "choice in child-care allowance" comes on the heels of big-ticket promises to trim the GST and cut medical wait lists.

The Tories hope the big three announcements - and more to come - will boost stagnant poll numbers by convincing wary voters to abandon the Liberals.

Harper also told supporters in Ottawa on Monday that he would provide \$250 million in tax credits to help community groups and businesses create 125,000 child-care spaces over five years.

He said his plan is better than the \$5-billion Liberal effort to create a national day-care program, which largely ignores stay-at-home parents.

"Parents can spend that money however they wish," Harper said. "You can choose the child-care option that best suits your family's needs."

The \$1,200 would be taxable through the spouse with the lower income.

It was yet another headline-grabbing announcement that had Harper setting the political agenda for the day, with his opponents forced to react.

The Liberals are expected to counter Tuesday with an expanded day-care plan of their own. But they're saving most of their fire for the new year when the battle heats up ahead of the Jan. 23 vote.

Prime Minister Paul Martin chided Harper for opposing government-funded day care.

"Now, Stephen Harper repeated today that he doesn't believe that public money should be put into day-care centres. Well, I do."

Martin was also sticking to the same recipe as last week: highlighting his government's economic record, demonizing Harper, and attacking Quebec separatists.

In a speech in Newfoundland, Martin boasted of Canada's eight consecutive balanced budgets and low interest rates, inflation and unemployment.

He ridiculed Harper's proposal to cut the GST to five per cent, saying it "would save you about 50 cents on a toaster."

The Liberal plan to cut income taxes by \$30 billion over six years would be a much greater benefit, Martin said.

He suggested the Tories would hurt the country's economic prosperity and social programs and worried aloud about the party's views on diversity and constitutional rights.

NDP Leader Jack Layton also dismissed Harper's plan as "a tax change" rather than a child-care program.

"This is the kind of plan (former Ontario premier) Mike Harris brought forward and it didn't create any child-care spaces."

Layton, seeking to overcome his party's tax-spend image, pledged that a New Democratic government would not raise taxes while slamming tax-cut promises by both the Liberals and Conservatives.

Layton flanked by candidate Paul Summerville, former chief economist with RBC Dominion Securities, called the Conservative proposal to cut the GST "wrongheaded."

He said he supports Liberal tax measures aimed at low-income earners - including raising the threshold at which people start paying taxes - but opposes big income and corporate tax cuts.

The NDP also got an endorsement Monday from the Muslim Canadian Congress.

Spokesman Tarek Fatah said federal security measures aimed at Muslims played into the decision to back the NDP.

The latest poll, taken before the two most recent Harper announcements, suggested the Liberals were holding on to their lead with 34 per cent support compared to 26 per cent for the Conservatives.

The Decima online survey of 4,337 randomly selected participants put the NDP at 19 per cent and the Bloc Quebecois at 13 per cent.

The survey, conducted from Nov. 26 through Dec. 1, is considered accurate within 1.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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