

Toronto Star

PM's Jewish pitch hits a new low, critics say

Tory flyer suggests Liberals are anti-Semitic

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OTTAWA—Angry Liberals Wednesday accused the Conservative government of reaching a new political low by circulating flyers characterizing the Liberals as anti-Semitic.

The flyers, which feature a photo of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, target ridings with large Jewish communities.

They accuse the Liberals of participating in the 2001 UN racism conference in Durban, South Africa, which the pamphlets describe as overtly anti-Semitic, and of supporting terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah. The flyers go after Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff for accusing Israel of committing war crimes.

"It is the lowest that I have seen in all of my experience on Parliament Hill. ... Nobody could have ever imagined that the Prime Minister of Canada and a Conservative party could stoop this low. It's the worst of the worst," Toronto Liberal MP Joe Volpe (Eglinton-Lawrence) told reporters.

The one-page flyer, which is a type known on Parliament Hill as a "10-per-center" for the rule that allows them to be mailed outside an MP's riding to a number of households equivalent to 10 per cent of those in the MP's riding, contrasts what it says are the Conservative and Liberal records on global anti-Semitism, Israel and Hamas.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney said the flyer notes a difference in records on issues of interest to supporters of Israel and to the Jewish community, and he denied the Conservatives were trying to suggest the Liberals were anti-Semitic.

"Anyone who's suggesting that is being completely over the top and mischievous," he told reporters.

The pamphlets ask voters to choose which federal leader "is on the right track to represent and defend the values of Canada's Jewish community."

And they compare Harper's strong support for Israel to alleged waffling on the part of the Liberals.

They say, for instance, that Harper's Conservatives "led the world" in boycotting the second UN-sponsored conference on racism in Durban, dubbed a "hate fest against Israel."

By contrast, the previous Liberal government "willingly participated in (the) overtly anti-Semitic" first Durban conference in 2001, the pamphlets say.

Whereas Harper "strongly backed Israel's right to self-defence against Hezbollah" during the bombardment of Lebanon in 2006, Ignatieff "accused Israel of committing war crimes," the pamphlets say.

And whereas the Harper government "led the world" in halting funding to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority, the leaflets say, Liberals opposed the move and wanted Hezbollah delisted as a terrorist organization.

Montreal Liberal MP Irwin Cotler, who is Jewish, was visibly shaken by the flyer, which went to his Mount Royal riding as well as Volpe's riding, Liberal MP Anita Neville's Winnipeg South Centre riding, Liberal MP Bernard Patry's Pierrefonds-Dollard riding and New Democrat Thomas Mulcair's Montreal riding of Outremont.

"This is totally misleading, it's false ... and it basically seeks to associate the Liberal party with anti-Semitism. This is shocking ... this has no place in Canadian politics," Cotler said.

The former Liberal justice minister noted it was a Liberal government that banned financial support to Hamas and Hezbollah.

"Let the facts show ... that it was the Liberal party in 2002 (that) listed Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations. This notion that we somehow sought the delisting of Hezbollah or somehow (we are) indulging terrorism is a scandalous misrepresentation," Cotler said.

The reference to Durban, the controversial UN World Conference against Racism held Aug. 31 to Sept. 8, 2001, which provided a platform for anti-Israeli sentiment, is also misleading, the Liberals said.

Cotler said he went to Durban as an observer and he noted the Israeli government of the day specifically asked Canada to remain at the conference "and make its voice felt and bear witness to what was happening."

Cotler said Ignatieff did accuse Israel of committing war crimes in one instance during the 2006 conflict in Lebanon, but later publicly apologized.

Volpe described the flyer as the most "egregious example of misrepresentation of facts that I have seen in all the years I've served in Parliament."

New Democrat and Bloc Québécois MPs agreed the pamphlets represented a new low in the partisan use of "10-per-center" mailings.

Mulcair, the NDP's deputy leader, called for "an examination of conscience as to how much taxpayers' money we're spending on these very partisan attacks."

Historically, Canada's Jewish voters have stood with the Liberal party, voting for it at a rate 20 per cent higher than the national average during the 1970s. However, that support fell to 8 to 10 per cent above the average in the years leading up to Harper's first minority government in 2006.

With files from The Canadian Press