

Easter tells local Liberals Canada's not what it used to be

By Bill Rea

Canada is not the country it used to be, and that's largely the fault of the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

That conclusion was spelled out Saturday by former solicitor general and current MP for Malpeque (Prince Edward Island) Wayne Easter when he addressed a meeting of the Dufferin-Caledon Federal Liberal Riding Association in Mono Mills.

"Canada isn't the Canada that we once knew," Easter commented, referring to the country's status on the world stage.

He referred to the recent G8 Summit in Northern Ireland, where Harper attacked Russian President Vladimir Putin for their support of Syria. He accused Harper of being a bully.

"Progress was made, but no thanks to Stephen Harper," Easter observed.

Easter reflected that in the time of Lester Pearson, Canada developed a standing in the world. While never seen as a military power,

"We've always been there as a peace broker," he said, adding Canada was able to help pull sides together. "Canada could play a middle role."

"Canada is no longer seen as a middle player," Easter declared, as he stated that Harper has lost Canada's place in the world by taking sides. "We need to get back to the kind of Canada that we've been."

Easter has been an MP since 1993. Prior to that, he was president of the National Farmers' Union for 11 years. Those years of experience have allowed him to see all parts of the country.

The impacts of the Harper government are being felt internally, as well as externally.

"Ottawa, these days, is a place of hate and fear," Easter commented.

He pointed out the Harper government came into power with promises of openness and transparency, yet he said there has never been a more secretive government than the one in place now. He added agricultural organizations are afraid to stand up to the government for fear of reprisals, like cutting off of funding, etc.

He suggested people go to their grocery store and check where the pork products they buy are coming from. It's mostly from the U.S. Canada, he said, used to have some of the best pork-breeding operations in the world.

"All that is gone because the federal government wouldn't challenge the powers that be," Easter charged, "the market place."

He added he talks with a lot of people who don't want it known that they've been in contact with him because they fear they will face funding cuts or having doors slammed in their faces.

"That's not what Canada is all about," Easter said.

The problems, he added, have spread to Parliamentary committees, which he said are no longer functional. Easter said if there's a motion to have a minister appear before the committee, one of the government members moves that the meeting goes into closed session to block the move.

"This isn't the Canada that we know, and we have to change that," he declared.

Easter also commented that Liberal governments were able to get the country's finances back in shape, but the Conservatives have been taking things apart. He said Canada used to rank seventh in the world as a tourist destination. The figure is now 18th.

He added Finance Minister Jim Flaherty has never hit the government's deficit targets. The Tories were handed a surplus when they came to power in 2006, and have continued to run deficits.

"They have been poor, very poor fiscal managers," Easter said.

He also addressed the government's position on crime, commenting it's easy to talk about helping victims, but stressing the importance of looking at the realities. Easter said when he was Solicitor General, there were 107 people per 100,000 Canadians incarcerated. The number in the United States was 692.

"Where do you feel safer walking the streets?" he asked, pointing out the American system has never worked well.

He added he worries about what happens to the criminal who could be rehabilitated once he or she gets out in another 10 years. "Our prisons could become universities for criminals," he observed.

Addressing agricultural matters, Easter pointed out this is now the main industry in Ontario, and one of the biggest in the country. He added some commodity sectors have been doing well, but others, like the beef sector, are facing a cash crunch these days. The government has responded by cutting the AgriInvest program in half. And he added not one farm organization is speaking out because they are afraid. He called that "a sad commentary on the federal government, which should be showing leadership."

Easter called for the creation of a National Food Policy for Canada, which answers a number of components, such as food safety. He said two of the worst food recalls in the country's history came under Harper's watch. He added companies are allowed to do their own inspections, and he stressed the need to have public sector inspectors who will challenge the companies.

Commenting on his party's status, Easter said they have a new leader in the person of Justin Trudeau. "He's doing quite well, and we're doing quite well in the polls at the moment," he observed. "Justin Trudeau is a young leader who really, in his heart, wants to do things different," he remarked, adding Harper is just coming out with attack ads that undermine and stretch the truth. "It shows just how mean and small the Harper crowd really is." He also said the party has to understand what it will be up against in the next election.



Wayne Easter chatted with Caledon Councillors Richard Whitehead and Richard Paterak in Mono Mills Saturday.



Malpeque MP and former solicitor general Wayne Easter addressed the Dufferin-Caledon federal Liberal Riding Association Saturday.