



PM Harper's media availability in Ottawa

March 1, 2006 - 12h30 - Ottawa, ON - 25 minutes

STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister): Good afternoon. Je suis heureux de confirmer aujourd'hui la nomination du juge Marshall Rothstein à la Cour suprême du Canada. La nomination du juge Rothstein marque un événement sans précédent dans notre histoire. C'est en effet la première fois qu'un juge de la Cour suprême est soumis aux questions de parlementaires élus démocratiquement, et l'audience publique a permis aux Canadiens et Canadiennes d'évaluer l'homme qui siègera bientôt au plus haut tribunal du pays. Réflexion faite, ce fut une décision facile. Je suis persuadé que le juge Rothstein sera un excellent ajout à la Cour suprême. I am pleased today to announce the appointment of Judge Marshall Rothstein to the Supreme Court of Canada. The appointment of Judge Rothstein marks an unprecedented development in our history. For the first time, a Supreme Court Justice faced questions from democratically-elected Members of Parliament. A public event that

Canadians the opportunity to evaluate the man who will soon sit on Canada's highest court. On reflection, this was an easy decision to make and, I'm confident that Justice Rothstein will make an excellent addition to the Supreme Court of Canada. Now I'll take a few questions that may be on your mind.

UNIDENTIFIED: Jacques Bourbeau, Global News.

REPORTER: It's Hannah Boudreau.

UNIDENTIFIED: Oh.

REPORTER: ...sorry.

UNIDENTIFIED: Hannah Boudreau...

REPORTER: Jacques left. (laughter) Mr. Harper, there, with regards to the murder of the two Canadians, the case is looking like a bit of a mess and the family is now saying, put out a statement saying, demanding that the government get more involved, and there's also the two women in

Thunder Bay who feel they're being framed in all of this. What is the government doing? What's the government going to do? Will they take this statement into consideration from the family?

HARPER: Sure, well first of all, let me just, once again, reiterate obviously our condolences and our sympathies to the family and loved ones of the Ianieros, the Ianiero family. Obviously this is a terrible tragedy and I hope everyone will handle it with sufficient discretion and with information rather than speculation. Let me just say the following things, first of all the RCMP has been in active contact and is in active contact with Mexican police authorities investigating these deaths, and there has been, from my understanding of my discussions with senior officials with the RCMP, it's been a cooperative relationship. In terms of rumours of extradition, the RCMP, my last discussions with them, the RCMP is unaware of any extradition request or any pending extradition request. We're obviously at the very early stages of the investigation. In terms of any broader concerns or discussions, Minister MacKay and myself are scheduled to meet with the Foreign Minister of Mexico who will be in town this week, and if there's anything necessary to raise there obviously we'll be raising it, but as I say, we've had good cooperation between the governments and

obviously we want to do anything we can to help Mexican authorities with their investigation.

UNIDENTIFIED: Yves Malo, TVA

REPORTER: M. Harper, est-ce que vous allez vous opposer à Ralph Klein, qui veut faire de la santé à deux vitesses en Alberta?

HARPER: Je peux dire seulement que le document en Alberta est seulement un document de travail. Le gouvernement du Canada a l'intention d'étudier le contenu là-dessus, et...je peux dire que nous aurons l'intention de publier une pleine réponse à l'avenir. Mais premièrement, je voudrais étudier ce document avec beaucoup d'attention.

REPORTER: Et en sous-question, je veux revenir aussi sur la question du couple tué au Mexique. Est-ce que le Canada fait son travail dans ce dossier là?

HARPER: Oui, c'est...c'est le cas. Encore je voudrais exprimer mes condoléances au famille Ianiero. Évidemment c'est une...une tragédie

terrible. J'espère les politiciens résistent pour gagner des manchettes les...les tentatives de spéculer. Je peut dire plusieurs choses. Premièrement...Premièrement, la GRC est une...est depuis le début est un contact actif avec les autorités mexicaines. Il y a une bonne coopération. C'est ce que la GRC me vient de dire. La GRC ne sait pas...ne connaît pas des...des tentatives d'avoir une extradition, ou même...même une...une demande pour une telle extradition à l'avenir. C'est tôt dans l'enquête policière. Évidemment, s'il y a des...des plus grandes concernes, le ministre MacKay et moi nous avons l'intention de rencontrer le ministre des Affaires étrangères du Mexique cette semaine. Mais, comme j'ai dit, il y a de la coopération et évidemment le gouvernement du Canada insiste...le gouvernement du Canada va offrir n'importe quelle aide nécessaire pour aider l'enquête.

UNIDENTIFIED: David...

HARPER: And somebody asked me to repeat the other answer in English. The, the Alberta document on health care is only a discussion paper at this point. I can just tell you that before I respond, the Government of Canada is going to want to examine this document in detail and we will, in

the course of I would hope the next few days, issue a full response to that report.

UNIDENTIFIED: David Akin, CTV.

REPORTER: Good afternoon, Prime Minister.

HARPER: Hi David.

REPORTER: I was just wondering, Don Drummond yesterday at TD Bank characterized the savings that your government will need to achieve as heroic, was the word he used, pretty strong language for an economist. Just wondered about your, your thoughts about that, and at this point, can you tell us, have you tasked any particular minister with a program review and expenditure review to find 22 billion dollars...?

HARPER: Well I can simply tell you that it's the intention of the Government of Canada and the new Government to do two things, one is to deliver the commitments we made to Canadians, and also to otherwise ensure that the Government of Canada lives within the means of the

taxpayers. In terms of those means, as we said during the election campaign, outside of priority areas, we intend to hold the Government of Canada to, to a general rise in spending that's no greater than inflation plus population growth in this country, because frankly we can't grow our Government faster than we grow our economy, and it has been for the last few years. So, you know I think this will be done simply with ongoing, I don't see it as a major exercise, it will simply be part of an ongoing exercise to ensure that Canadian tax dollars are used wisely.

UNIDENTIFIED: Emmanuelle Latraverse, Radio Canada.

REPORTER: M. Harper, sur le registre des armes à feu, les corps policiers ont rencontré vos ministres responsables au cours des dernières semaines. Ils ont l'impression que votre gouvernement serait prêt à étudier la question davantage avant de l'abolir, de voir s'il y aurait pas moyen plutôt de le modifier, de le rendre plus efficace. Est-ce que pour vous, dans la mesure où c'est une de vos promesses électorales peut-être les plus connues, est-ce que cette idée d'abolir le registre des armes à feu, un point c'est tout, est non négociable?

HARPER: Premièrement, depuis longtemps, c'est clair que la position du Parti conservateur est...nous nous sommes opposés au registre des armes...des armes, comment...des armes de chasse. Nous nous sommes opposés à un registre des armes de chasse, coûte très cher, son...son résultat concret. Évidemment, la situation minoritaire limite nos capacités d'agir. Nous sommes en train d'étudier nos options, mais évidemment, nous voulons dépenser des fonds publics dans le dossier de justice...de la justice criminelle d'une façon efficace, et c'est notre priorité.

REPORTER: Est-ce que vous êtes prêt à vous engager à passer par un vote à la Chambre des communes sur cette question précise là du registre des armes à feu?

HARPER: Je n'ai pas l'intention de tenir un vote à moins que nous soyons clairs que nous pouvons gagner...puissions gagner ce vote. Alors, il y a des limites. Nous ferons ce que nous pouvons faire dans des circonstances réalistes.

UNIDENTIFIED: Eric Sorensen, CBC.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, would you be willing to look again at the Robert Latimer case? He's serving time and, or is clemency just not on as far as you're concerned in this case where part of the issue is mandatory minimum sentencing?

HARPER: Well this is the first it's been raised with the Government, it certainly didn't make any election commitment to look at this and I'm not in a position to speculate today whether we may or may not.

REPORTER: Can I just follow up. Philosophically, the court in this case did not become activist. It said Parliament could look at clemency as an issue. Is it something you would at least signal you would be open to looking at, or you just think that in this case a mandatory minimum was set and that's the way the law is?

HARPER: It's a criminal justice matter and obviously in the normal course of events, governments don't interfere in the prosecution or in the, in sentencing in criminal justice cases. We've made no commitment to get involved. As I say, beyond that, Eric, this is the first anyone's raised it with me, during or since the election campaign.

UNIDENTIFIED: Joël-Denis Bellavance, La Presse.

REPORTER: ...Harper, vous allez rencontrer Jean Charest pour une troisième fois d'ici quelques semaines. Vous avez déjà rencontré l'ensemble des premiers ministres, et les Libéraux ici à Ottawa vous accusent d'être le busboy des provinces. Comment vous réagissez à cette accusation?

HARPER: C'est une...C'est une accusation intéressante. Il y a...J'ai noté que au même temps que le chef libéral et des Libéraux ont fait cette déclaration, il insiste que je donne l'argent pour une allocation familiale aux provinces, au lieu d'aux parents. C'est mon intention de...C'est notre engagement de donner une allocation aux parents directement. C'est la position du...du Parti libéral de devenir un busboy pour les provinces dans ce dossier. Ce n'est pas mon intention.

UNIDENTIFIED: Susan Lunn, CBC.

REPORTER: How do you think Alberta's plan to allow doctors to work

both in a public and a private system could comply with the Canada Health Act? And I guess as a follow up, if your Government had to enforce the Canada Health Act and take measures through say the dispute resolution mechanism, or to withhold payments, that kind of thing, how, how strong do you think the Federal Government could be against a province like Alberta that has a 10 billion dollar surplus?

HARPER: Well as I said we're going to take close look at this before we respond in detail. Let me just say the following, this Government is committed to the Canada Health Act. My understand is that the Alberta Government is not just committed to the Canada Health Act, but the Alberta Government has enshrined the Canada Health Act in Alberta's own legislation, so obviously as we do our review, our own review of the proposals that Alberta's put out, we're going to want to satisfy ourselves that they're within the Canada Health Act, and I would think the Government of Alberta would want to do the same thing, given that I know the Premier and the Government of Alberta have long committed and repeatedly committed in legislation and elsewhere that they will respect the Canada Health Act and that's a commitment they've made, not just to the Government of Canada, that's a commitment they've made to Alberta

citizens.

LUNN: (inaudible) given their financial position?

HARPER: Well as I say, I think they, what's interesting here is that we're looking at it in more detail but my understanding is that this is enshrined in Alberta's own legislation.

UNIDENTIFIED: Peter Chura, CHUM.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, the Liberals and the NDP have accused your Government of waiting too long to get involved aggressively on the, the, the case of the murders in Mexico to aggressively push the Mexican government to ensure that the investigation was conducted properly. How can you reassure the family that this opportunity has, has not been lost now a week and a half later?

HARPER: Look I just repeat what I said earlier, the RCMP, Foreign Affairs had been in active contact with their Mexican counterparts, and in turn, in contact with Government, with our Cabinet Ministers and their offices. I

would really try and dissuade the opposition parties from trying to jump in on this story for political reasons. It's a terrible tragedy. The investigation is in early stages and I don't think the opposition parties do themselves, or the families or anybody any credit by trying to engage in uninformed speculation.

UNIDENTIFIED: Yvon Cloutier Radio-Canada.

REPORTER: Vous voulez prendre un peu de temps pour réfléchir à ce qui est proposé par l'Alberta, mais quand même, que deux provinces en l'espace de quelques semaines en arrivent avec comme solution pour améliorer le système de santé, de donner...laisser une plus grande place au privé. Qu'est-ce que ça vous dit sur...sur ce système de santé?

HARPER: Évidemment, il y a une...il y a un désir des provinces de régler les problèmes de la santé. Et les provinces comprennent, comme je pense la majorité de la population, comprennent que il y a des problèmes dans le système de santé. On a besoin des réformes, des vraies réformes, pour régler ces problèmes, et j'ai dit à plusieurs reprises que ce gouvernement est prêt de travailler avec les provinces dans la cadre de la

loi canadienne sur la santé. Heureusement, le gouvernement du Québec a proposé des réformes majeures, mais des réformes qui respectent clairement la loi canadienne sur la santé, et ce gouvernement, le gouvernement Charest, a un allié dans ses réformes dans ce gouvernement fédéral. J'encourage toutes les provinces de suivre l'exemple du Québec. C'est un exemple qui aide la situation, et...surtout au Québec, le gouvernement du Québec étudie et propose des réformes et des réformes qui assurent l'accès pour des gens ordinaires, et c'est une...c'est une de leurs priorités principales. Ils...Ils encouragent une garantie pour des patients pour les services de santé, et c'est important, et j'encourage l'Alberta et les autres provinces d'avoir le même cible.

Et...Let me say that in English as well, that you know, Quebec has put out radical...I should say radical's the wrong word, Quebec has put out significant, major changes, reforms to the health care system, but reforms that clearly respect principles of the Canada Health Act. I'd encourage all provinces to do that. Quebec has put a focus, in spite of making major reforms, Quebec has made a focus, access for patients and a wait times guarantee for patients. I would encourage Alberta and the other provinces as they talk about reforms to always keep in mind the importance of access for patients, and I would encourage all of the to look at, particularly

Quebec's proposals to establish a patient wait times guarantee, which as you know I think is, is not just a, a principle or an objective of this Government, but I think is one that all Canadians share.

UNIDENTIFIED: Jeff Sallot, The Globe and Mail.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, the UN Human Rights Committee last November asked Canada to investigate the case of three Canadians who were tortured in Syria and who believe that the Canadian Government may have been complicit in their torture and interrogation. The previous Government refused to do so. Today, a former Prime Minister, two former Foreign Ministers, a former Solicitor General, former parliamentarians from all political parties have asked your Government to re-examine the cases of Mr. Nureddin, Mr. Almalki, and Mr. El Maati. Will you re-examine these cases?

HARPER: Well just say I haven't yet seen the letters, I'll take a close look at them. I'm obviously interested in what they have to say. Our Government in the past has been critical of the previous government and in, you know, in its failures to stand up for Canadians abroad, so we're

going to take a look at those letters and obviously come up with our own proposal.

UNIDENTIFIED: Andrew Mills, Toronto Star.

REPORTER: You had a number of the Premiers over to your house on Friday night.

HARPER: Yes I did.

REPORTER: We've heard from them what they came away from that meeting with. I wonder, especially vis a vis a royal commission and childcare, I wonder what you came away from that meeting with.

HARPER: Well, I had a good meeting. I listened carefully to the views of the Premier, you know I take them all very seriously, they're important partners in our federation. I, I would say that I was glad I didn't have my cheque book there because there were a lot more potential bills being talked about than certainly I could possibly afford to pay, or that the taxpayers of Canada could afford to pay. We're obviously going to have to

use our own discretion on how we spend our money. Fiscal imbalance, as I've said repeatedly is a significant concern, one that our Government shares. I know that one Premier, Premier McGuinty has proposed that we look at a royal commission. I haven't ruled that out but I must say that, my inclination at this point is to receive the, receive the reports we're expected to receive in the near future first. We're going to receive the equalization expert report that the previous Government commissioned. We're going to receive that in a few weeks I hope. We're also going to receive (inaudible) by the Council of the Federation on the fiscal imbalance. We'll take a look at those two reports, we'll get those this spring, and then over the next year we'll decide where to go. But my, quite frankly my own inclination would be probably not to have another commission, but would be to proceed with some proposals, at least Federal proposals and see if we can get any kind of buy in from the Provinces on resolving this problem.

UNIDENTIFIED: Alan Woods, CanWest.

REPORTER: We hear today there's reports out of Pakistan that Prime Minister Aziz will be welcoming you to the country next Friday, and I wonder as your mind sort of turns to South Asia, there's been a lot of talk

about Afghanistan. The interim leader of the opposition has talked about perhaps you didn't do a good enough job selling this to the Canadian people. There's been polls showing sort of wavering support, and of course there's been sort of daily attacks on Canadian troops, and I wonder if you have any concerns right now or if you feel that perhaps you need a new mandate for Canadian involvement in Afghanistan?

HARPER: Well first of all let me, let me say a couple of things. Let me just say that having a, I do actually occasionally read the papers, and I've, according to those papers, been to and from Afghanistan several times in the last couple of weeks. I don't have any plans to go there, but obviously, you know, in the future we, you know if we decide to travel somewhere we'll let you know. In terms of the more substantive question, which is, which is a serious one, Canada decided to participate in the Afghan mission some time ago. This is a critical mission. It's important for global security. The party I lead strongly supported the previous Government in its commitments and we believe that the success of this mission is important, not just, not just in terms of Canada's objectives but important in terms of the contribution we are making to the world community and to global security. I am very distressed, I was very distressed to read

suggestions from some Liberal MPs this week at their caucus meeting that they might now want to question that involvement and might now want to have a vote. You do not send men and women into harm's way in a dangerous mission with the support of our party and other Canadians and then decide, once they're over there, that you're not sure you should have sent them. That's not the way this Government's going to behave. We are fully behind this mission, we are fully behind these troops, and we will fulfill not just our obligations to the international community, we will also fulfill the, the responsibility we have and all Canadians have to strongly support the men and women that we have put in a dangerous mission, and that's what our Government will do.

UNIDENTIFIED: Last question.

HARPER: En français? Juste...(laughter) Okay, got to get myself wound up again. (laughter). Comme vous le savez, ce parti appuie depuis le début le rôle du Canada en Afghanistan. C'est un rôle important pour la...la sécurité mondiale, et nos relations avec la communauté internationale. Le gouvernement libéral vient d'envoyer...l'ancien gouvernement libéral vient d'envoyer nos troupes dans une situation

dangereuse. On ne décide pas de questionner une telle décision après avoir envoyé des troupes, des hommes et des femmes dans des uniformes canadiens dans une telle situation. Notre gouvernement appuie sans équivoque nos troupes, et nous avons l'intention d'assumer nos responsabilités internationales et les responsabilités que tous les Canadiens ont envers ces troupes.

UNIDENTIFIED: Last question Martin Stringer, CPAC.

REPORTER: Mr. Prime Minister, there were some suggestions this week that you might have made commitments to the Alberta Premier about elections for the Senate, I'm just wondering where you are in that process, if commitments have been made to hold elections for the next Senate vacancies. And also given, as a supplementary, given that Michael Fortier has promised to step down and run in the next election, whether that would also cover that Quebec vacancy that's coming up?

HARPER: First of all it is my intention, it was a commitment as you know in the platform to begin the process of reforming the Senate and begin it by creating an electoral process for the nomination of Senators. I do

intend to do that. I raised it with the Premiers in general terms, we haven't set time lines, but it's something I would like to get on with sooner rather than later, and I would expect that no later than the next Federal election we will have a Senatorial election process in place and yes, Senator Fortier's seat could well be one of those that is up for election. Obviously I'm not closed to, to other kinds of reforms and, but you know as I say, one way or the other, I told the Premiers while I'd like to see more comprehensive Senate reform one way or another, we are committed to Senate elections.

REPORTER: ...take a certain degree of cooperation too on the part of the Quebec Government because the...the provincial governments would be involved in, in helping put up lists or candidates. Have you gotten that sort of enthusiasm from Mr. Charest and the Quebec Government?

HARPER: Well, no, let me just correct the premise. If we were to engage in comprehensive Senate reform, constitutional reform, that would, that would obviously require provincial cooperation, I would encourage all the provinces to look at the importance of overhauling the Federal system here in Ottawa, I think it is important for the long run health of the country,

but today the decision on who to name to the Senate is a power exclusively, exercised exclusively by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister can choose to create an electoral process and he can choose to do so simply at the Federal level, particularly if we were to hold Senate elections say at the time of Federal elections. So, while I obviously would like to see the cooperation of the Provinces, it's a commitment our Government's made to pursue Senate elections and that's something we believe we can do from Ottawa.

UNIDENTIFIED: Merci. Thank you.

HARPER: Okay thanks.

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