

Agriculture minister points finger at Liberals' cuts to budgets for food inspection

Sarah Schmidt, Canwest News Service

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OTTAWA - Speaking for the first time since issuing a public apology nearly two weeks ago over "inappropriate" jokes about a deadly listeriosis outbreak linked to processed meats, Agriculture Minister Gerry Ritz on Monday faced a barrage of attacks by opposition politicians who accused him of ducking responsibility for food safety.

The Liberals and New Democrats pounced on Ritz's quick exit, in which he declined to speak to reporters, after participating in a national agriculture debate hosted by the Canadian Federation of Agriculture.

The Liberal agriculture critic chalked up Ritz's fast departure to the "bubble campaign" of the Conservatives.



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"Only the prime minister is allowed to speak and the messaging on everything comes from the Prime Minister's Office," said Wayne Easter of Prince Edward Island.

"I guess it's typical of this government. When the going gets tough, they slip out the back door," said Tony Martin, an Ontario MP who represented the NDP at the debate.

Ritz apologized on Sept. 17 after news surfaced of his off-colour jokes about the listeriosis outbreak caused by contaminated deli meats. Nineteen deaths have been attributed to listeriosis.

During a conference call with bureaucrats at the height of the outbreak in August, he fretted about possible political damage, saying, "This is like a death by a thousand cuts, or should I say cold cuts."

When Ritz was told of a death in Prince Edward Island, Ritz joked, "Please tell me it's Wayne Easter."

Hours after the comments were made public, Ritz issued an apology "without reservation" for his "inappropriate

and callous" comments.

Ritz tried to turn the tables during the debate on Monday, attacking previous Liberal governments for drastically cutting budgets for food inspections and shifting inspection responsibilities to industry to police itself.

"Let's talk about how we got to this situation," said Ritz, citing deep cuts to the Agriculture Department's food inspection branch resulting in the equivalent of nearly 1,300 food-safety jobs in one year alone.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, circulated quote clips from successive reports from the auditor general when the Liberals were in power showing large gaps in the food inspection system that put Canadians at risk.

Calling food safety a "defining issue" in the election, Easter brushed off the criticism to attack a government plan, outlined in a cabinet document last November and obtained in July by Canwest News Service, to download further responsibility for food inspection onto industry.

"The bottom line is this. Under Stephen Harper, he has belief to get government basically out of government, to download responsibility onto provinces in some cases and download responsibility onto industry. That's why we've seen the listeriosis crisis to a certain extent, or that should be a shot across the bow not to go that way," Easter said during the debate.

Martin took shots at both the Liberals and Conservatives, saying both have mishandled food safety and have made "unconscionable cuts" to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

He also reiterated his party's call for Harper to fire Ritz for mishandling the listeriosis outbreak and an issue that is "so serious" to Canadians.

"There's nothing more important of a government than protecting the food we all eat," said Martin.

According to a newly released survey conducted by Nanos Research and commissioned by the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, an overwhelming majority of Canadians are opposed to the Conservative government's plans to expand industry self-policing for food inspection.

The Nanos Research survey, released Monday, found that while 22 per cent of Canadians accept an increase in reliance on industry self-policing, 73 per cent would like to see their government invest more resources and play a more hands-on role.

The survey also found a high level of trust in government inspectors and scientists to ensure the safety of food (64 per cent) and much less confidence in food industry employees (25 per cent).

The results were obtained through a random telephone survey of 1,200 Canadians from Sept. 20 -22, 2008. The margin of accuracy is 2.8 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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