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News

**Dion stickhandles North**

Grit leader promises to protect Arctic

By KATHLEEN HARRIS, NATIONAL BUREAU CHIEF



Liberal Leader Stephane Dion plays street hockey with local children during a campaign stop in Iqaluit, Nunavut, yesterday. (Adrian Wyld, The Canadian Press)

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CHURCHILL, Man. -- Stephane Dion used self-deprecating humour to press the grave impact of global warming on polar bears as a new poll shows his Liberals closing the gap with the Conservatives.

During a stop in this community known as Canada's "polar bear capital," the Liberal Leader renowned for his poor command of the English language recalled delivering a speech to wildlife experts when he was environment minister. His audience couldn't keep a straight face.

"It was not funny -- I was speaking about species at risk," he told a small crowd gathered at a waterfront site marked with a tall inukshuk. "After, I asked my people why they were laughing like that and they said, 'Minister, all the speech long you spoke about the polar bear.' "

Dion said he's made some progress in the English language since then, but the climate change problem has become more critical.

"It will be something fundamental for me -- to provide protection for the wildlife in Canada and to make Canada a champion in the fight against climate change," he said.

The latest Nanos Research daily tracking poll shows support for the Conservatives slipping to 34% nationally as the Liberals nip four points behind at 30%. Dion expects an already dirty campaign could feature much mud-slinging in the final week before the vote.

But he insists he's not fazed by the latest numbers.

"The only poll I care about is this one," he said, pointing vaguely in the direction of what he thought was the North Pole. Then, pointing in the opposite direction: "Or this one -- where is the north?"

Earlier in the day, Dion was in Iqaluit, Nunavut to stress how his vision for the North is in stark contrast to Harper's "insulting" militaristic "use-it-or-lose it" approach. He said a Liberal government would empower the local population, push territorial claims through diplomatic channels and help protect the environment.

"We need to be sure we have an international rule about the North, otherwise you will have a jungle. A jungle without trees, but a jungle," he said. "When we decide to be a good custodian of an international problem, we are the best."

Dion promised to enhance aboriginal language initiatives, lure more doctors and nurses to the North with medical school debt forgiveness and to boost literacy and anti-violence programs. He also pledged to increase the northern living allowance.

Dion conceded that NDP Leader Jack Layton has promised even more on his own trip to the North, but said his plan will be financed with "Monopoly money." Harper, who also brought his campaign to Iqaluit, has tried to stake Arctic sovereignty as a Conservative legacy issue.

But Dion claimed the defence of Canada's Arctic is one of the key driving factors behind his run for the top political job.

"This is one of the main reasons why I want to be prime minister of this country. I want to show that Canadians are the best custodians of the North, the best custodians of the Arctic. And then our sovereignty on the Arctic will be recognized by the world," he said.

"This starts with the people. You care about the people of the North -- you don't say 'use it or lose it' as Mr. Harper has said. This is an insult."

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