

Reform doing its job, says Harris

By SHANE MILLS

Prince George Free Press

When British Columbians picked 24 of 32 Reformers to represent them in Ottawa, they were expecting big things. And even though the pundits have chastised the party's performance over the last year, Prince George-Bulkley Valley MP Dick Harris maintains Reform is having the desired effect on the Canadian political scene.

"Reform has controlled the agenda," says Mr. Harris. "All the items the government has been dealing with - debt, the Young Offenders Act, family issues, immigration - those issues all belong to the Reform Party. They wouldn't be dealing with them if it wasn't for us."

As an example, Mr. Harris offers the debt. He says the Liberals campaigned on the fact they were going to create jobs, something he terms "fairly standard." In contrast, the Reformers called for balancing the budget in three years.

Since the election, Mr. Harris says the Liberal goal has been three per cent deficit to Gross Domestic Product. "We've always said that's not enough. Simply by growing the economy you can achieve three per cent. But three weeks ago (Finance Minister) Paul Martin started talking about balancing the budget."

And though the party isn't getting the respect it thinks it deserves, Mr. Harris says that's okay. "We didn't go to seek a lot of glory. We went there to alter the principles of



Harris: Using business ideas to aid constituents ROB BIRON/FREE PRESS

government. To us, that's a victory."

The 50-year-old MP begins to warm to his subject of Reform influencing the government's agenda, and offers up the new immigration policies unveiled by Sergio Marchi. "We've been saying for years that immigration should be based on the economic need of the country and you know what we got called." But he notes that in the new policy introduced by the federal government, immigration based on

economic need featured prominently. "Timing is everything in politics," he says.

Mr. Harris, who was in the tire business for over 25 years, says part of the problem has been the national media. Before and during the election, he says the media tried to destroy the party from the outside, by inviting harsh criticism from special interest groups, but the policy didn't work in the west, though he concedes the party probably did lose

some seats in Ontario. Now, he asserts the media "is trying to create dissension within the party."

According to Mr. Harris, the premise that Reform is moving to the centre of the political spectrum has caused the most damage. But the party is, in fact, "solidifying our position on the right," says Mr. Harris.

But there have been some adjustments to being the new guys in Ottawa. The party hasn't had the direct impact it would have liked, the Bloc Quebecois has stolen much of the media limelight and the party is re-examining its position on perks. Mr. Harris currently takes a 10 per cent pay cut, which he donates to charity, and says that will continue "as long as I can afford it."

In terms of not getting the publicity for their pet issues, Mr. Harris is confident the party can still set the national agenda by focusing on the grassroots level. "If somehow we can get what we're saying out to the Canadian public and get them on our side, this will be reflected in their polls." And polls, he says, are the reason for the shift in Liberal policy on the debt, the Young Offenders Act and immigration.

On a personal note, Mr. Harris says the work done for constituents has been the most gratifying. While explaining the bureaucracy can be daunting to most people, Mr. Harris says using the privileges of being an MP to solve problems is rewarding. "That's the record I'll put up in the next election."

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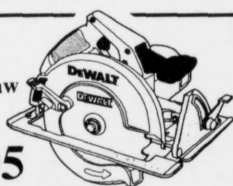
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