

Harper meddling in U.S. primaries, Democrats say

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Two years after U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins was accused of meddling in Canada's federal election, the same is being said of Stephen Harper's Conservatives with respect to the current U.S. contest.

Democrats appearing on a nationwide U.S. political program accused the Harper government yesterday of interfering in the primary campaigns to help the Republican Party candidate in the coming campaign.

"You've got a right-wing government in Canada that is trying to help the Republicans and is out there actively interfering in this campaign," Bob Shrum told the popular program, Meet the Press. Mr. Shrum is a top-level Democrat adviser who has had key roles in the presidential campaigns of Al Gore and John Kerry.

At issue are reports that members of Mr. Harper's prime ministerial office leaked word last week that a member of Barack Obama's campaign told a Canadian diplomat that Mr. Obama was not serious when he raised the possibility of renegotiating the free-trade agreement.

That statement has become fodder for Mr. Obama's opponents, who have accused the Illinois senator of saying one thing to win votes in hard-pressed states such as Ohio, and another to keep the peace with the Canadian government.

ABC News says the leaker was Mr. Harper's chief of staff, Ian Brodie. Mr. Brodie reportedly learned of the conversation - which took place between Mr. Obama's economic adviser and a Canadian diplomat in Chicago - from Michael Wilson, Canada's ambassador to the United States.

One of the talk show's Republican participants, Mary Matalin, used the apparent flip-flop to attack the Democratic candidates - Mr. Obama and Hillary Clinton - who have said they would reopen NAFTA.

"Then he had that Canadian thing where 'I'm saying this, but I mean that,' " Ms. Matalin said.

Ms. Matalin is a well-known Republican strategist, having worked for both George Bush Jr. and Sr. and for Vice-President Dick Cheney.

Mr. Obama's team has repeatedly denied that such a conversation took place.

Opposition MPs said it appears obvious to them that the Harper Tories want the Republicans to win and that they have taken steps to help them to do so.

The Harper government may find itself in hot water should the presidential winner be a Democrat, they said.

"This is serious," said Navdeep Baines, the Liberal Party's trade critic.

"If there's a perception there of interference, I think it will definitely put a strain on our relationship in the future."

The brouhaha is somewhat reminiscent of the 2006 election, when Mr. Wilkins lashed back at then-prime-minister Paul Martin for his criticisms of the United States and was criticized for interfering.

For its part, the federal government is saying that there were no calls between itself and any staff members of a campaign team.

The Canadian embassy says on its website that "at no time has any member of a Presidential campaign called the Canadian Ambassador or any official at the Embassy to discuss NAFTA."

Mr. Harper's communications director, Sandra Buckler, said Mr. Brodie also doesn't remember such a conversation.

"Ian Brodie does not recall discussing this matter and at the end of the day Ambassador Wilson issued a statement and we stand by that statement," Ms. Buckler said.

Last week, Mr. Harper said that reopening the NAFTA deal would be a mistake.

As well, Canadian officials have warned that a renegotiation could put the supply of Canadian oil to the United States at stake.

Ms. Matalin used Mr. Harper's remarks yesterday to argue against the idea of reopening the pact.

"Those sands up there have as much oil as Saudi Arabia," she said.

"And Harper and the Trade Minister came out and said, 'You want to opt out? You want to threaten to opt out? Guess what. We'll open up the clause, and we'll renegotiate so you don't get favour - favourability relative to energy trade and I - we'll sell our energy to China.' "