

## NEWS

## 'Dithering' Prime Minister Reverses Position and Says No to Missile Defense

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News Editor



On Thursday Prime Minister Paul Martin announced Canada would not participate in the American ballistic missile defence (BMD) program. This marks an about face for the Prime Minister who earlier insisted he favored joining the missile defence program during his Liberal leadership campaign and then again shortly after becoming Prime Minister in late 2003. On those occasions he stated that agree or disagree with the BMD program, Canada must have a seat at the table in the event of missiles being fired over Canadian airspace.

Controversy surrounding the issue flared earlier in the week, as incoming Canadian Ambassador to the US, Frank McKenna told reporters that Canada already joined the missile defence program as the two countries have agreed to share missile tracking information in NORAD. The program itself, intended to protect the United States from a nuclear missile launched by a rouge state or terrorist group, is loaded with controversy. Along with being expensive, the program has proved very unreliable during tests. Additionally, critics charge the program will lead to the weaponization of space, possibly an arms race, and question whether the program will actually work against terrorist attacks in the post 9/11 world.

Opinion polls have suggested a large majority of the country is opposed to ballistic missile defence. The opposition is strongest in Quebec, a province where the Liberals need to increase their support in order to contend for a majority government in the next election after a poor showing

in Quebec in last June's election.

The NDP has been steadfastly opposed to Canadian participation in the program, and NDP foreign affairs critic Alexa McDonough praised the decision to not participate in BMD.

The United States wanted the Canadian government to sign on to the program, some speculated to give it legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. In his state visit to Canada last fall, President George W. Bush publicly and privately urged Prime Minister Martin to participate in BMD. After the news broke that Martin decided against the program last week, the reaction from Washington was of surprise more than anything else. US Ambassador to Canada Paul Cellucci said he could not understand why Canada would not want to be at the table if missiles were launched over Canadian airspace.

The decision seemingly comes at a poor time for Prime Minister Martin, as he has been under attack for his indecisive leadership since replacing Jean Chretien as Prime Minister, earning himself the nickname 'Mr. Dithers' from *The Economist*, an influential political magazine published in Britain. Martin was on the fence regarding the issue for the past several months, and his decision to backtrack his previous intentions for Canadian participation in BMD will only cement his label of 'Mr. Dithers'.

However, the announcement also made sense for two main reasons. First, the majority of Canadians opposed the program. Second, Martin is preparing to face a Liberal party convention in March, where many party members planned to push the party to oppose BMD. The Prime Minister now gets to avoid what could have been a very damaging internal feud within the Liberal party.

## Statscan Confirms University Participation Gap

OTTAWA—Students from low-income backgrounds are still woefully under-represented in Canadian universities, according to a report from Statistics Canada released today. The third report of its kind in the last two years, the study concludes that as income rises, so do participation rates in university.

"Canada has made no progress towards improving access to post-secondary education for low-income families," said George Soule, National Chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students. "University remains firmly out of reach for many low- and middle-income students."

The study, titled *Participation in Post-secondary Education in Canada*, examines participation rates in both university and college between 1993 and 2001. In addition to confirming the widely recognised exclusion of students from the lowest-income bracket, it also tracks a small but worrisome decline in participation from families earning less than \$75,000 per year (the middle-income brackets).

"The slight decline of participation of middle-income Canadians should serve as a cautionary note to Bob Rae and others who believe that students from families earning between \$35,000 and \$75,000 can and should pay higher tuition fees," said Soule.

The study also notes interesting trends in participation at institutions with lower tuition fees. Community colleges continue to boast an equality of participation from across the income spectrum. In Québec, where there are no tuition fees for college, participation rates are 15% higher than other regions.

The Canadian Federation of Students is calling on the federal government to increase transfer payments to the provinces to at least 1993 levels and implement a national system of needs-based grants.

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