

# Conservative Leadership Hopefuls Square Off in First Televised Debate

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Reporter

The first televised debate between all three candidates vying for the leadership of the Conservative Party took place last week, and was made perhaps more significant by recent problems plaguing the Liberal Party.

The debate finally gave Canadians the chance to see all three candidates in action, as Belinda Stronach had refused to partake in earlier televised debates. With four weeks left before the vote, each candidate is stepping up their campaign.

Stephen Harper (44), graduated from the University of Calgary with an MA in economics and was a founding member of the Reform Party. He has led the Canadian Alliance Party for the past 18 months and returned to the House of Commons in 2002 after a 5 year absence. More recently, Harper forged a merger with then Progressive Conservative leader Peter MacKay.

Tony Clement (42), graduated with a BA in political science and a law degree from the University of Toronto and was a member of the Ontario Legislative Assembly from 1995 until he lost his seat in last fall's provincial election. He also failed to win the leadership of the Ontario Progressive Conservatives, but did achieve prominence among Ontarians as the Minister of Health during last year's SARS outbreak.

Belinda Stronach (38), is the least politically experienced of the three, having never held elected office before opting to run for the leadership. She attended business school at York University, but dropped out after one year of studies. She went on to have a successful career in business, eventually becoming President and CEO of Magna

International, a company her father founded. She also played a backroom role in doctoring the merger between the Alliance and PC Party.

At the time of the debate last Sunday, Harper led the pack according to an Ipsos-Reid poll released February 20th, holding 46% of the party's support. Stronach held 26% of voter support, Clement 17% and 11% of possible voters remained undecided as to who they wanted as leader.

Harper's support is based mainly in Western Canada, with about 60% in each Western province. He is considered weak in Quebec, and especially in Atlantic Canada, where he made some controversial remarks regarding the economics in the region. The bulk of Clement's support lies not surprisingly in Ontario, but he is still relatively unknown throughout the rest of the country. He also did not get a head start, nor enjoys the deep pockets that the other two candidates may benefit from. Stronach holds 44% of decided voters in Quebec, as well as 34% in Atlantic Canada, but she also has raised eyebrows with her comments regarding the use of some form of user fees for the healthcare system. As one of the chief objectives of uniting the right was to create a truly national party, many Conservatives must be somewhat troubled to see how divisive the support for the candidates is.

For his part, Clement emphasized the importance of being clear and decisive when it comes to serving all Canadians stating during the debate: "We've got to be clear on healthcare, we've got to be clear on supporting Canadians, when it comes to the military, we've got to be clear when it comes to jobs and opportunity."

Harper outlined his experience during the debate, dismissing Clement and Stronach's notions that a new uniting face was needed for the party. He insisted instead that the

general public would much rather replace the current government with someone who has a proven record. "[They want] the guy who built the party, the guy who was in there fighting."

During the debate, Belinda Stronach downplayed her inexperience, asking Canadians to look at what professional politicians had caused in Canada over the past ten years highlighting high taxes, a massive debt, a depleted military, inadequate healthcare and "the most serious scandal to hit this country in its history." She told the party that they should all be asking themselves why the party is still ten points behind the Liberals in the polls. She was referring to a public poll that revealed that

the Liberal Party had taken a considerable hit in wake of the sponsorship scandal, but had panned out at 36%, with the Conservative Party at 27%. Many speculate that recent events surrounding the scandal could delay an expected spring election, allowing more time for the new Conservative Party to organize.

The Conservative Party Leadership vote will take place March 20th.

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