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PM's decision on contraception aid could spark backlash from social conservatives

Institute of Marriage and Family Canada plays down the danger PM Stephen Harper faces as he drifts further to the centre on economic and social measures.

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The defeat of the Liberal House of Commons motion aimed at cornering Prime Minister Stephen Harper over his G8 maternal and child health initiative has not ended the controversy the Liberals ignited by attempting to steer the government into a debate over abortion.

The director of one of Canada's largest evangelical Christian lobby groups says Prime Minister Harper's decision to leave a door open for contraception aid in the plan could spark a backlash from a swath of social, fiscal, and church fundamentalists that numbers up to two or three million voters.

"If they're just simply spending millions of dollars supposedly distributing condoms, for instance, which may or may not be any good, I would question that and say, 'Is that wise expenditure of money? Not because of a moral or philosophical base, but are we getting our dollar's worth?'" said Brian Rushfeldt, executive director of the Canadian Family Action Coalition.

The controversy over Prime Minister Harper's (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) sudden announcement of the maternal health plan last January has further exposed the risk the Prime Minister faces as he continues to seek support from middle-ground voters while retaining the crucial support of social and fiscal conservatives who hold extreme views.

During interviews about the maternal health plan, discontent with the government's deficit budget and stimulus spending also surfaced.

Mr. Rushfeldt said he and his organization, which he said has roughly 40,000 supporters across the country, supported Prime Minister Harper when he first announced last January he planned to push a maternal and child health plan for developing countries at the June G8 summit in Huntsville, Ont.

Mr. Rushfeldt called the original idea of organizing new nutrition and medical help for millions of mothers and children in poor countries a "noble cause." But he said

he and others in the conservative religious community were skeptical after support for abortion—which Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) said should be included in the assistance—and contraception entered the mix.

"That's a whole different issue," he said. "If countries want to support abortion or contraception and help fund something in a developing country, that's certainly a different focus than trying to help with clean water or food, housing.

"With the talk now about contraception being part of the plan, I think there is a need to clarify exactly what is contraception. What are we talking about, are we talking about providing condoms or pills, or what does that mean? I've heard fiscal conservatives question why are we spending this kind of money on third-world countries for such a thing, because in many cases they feel that should be their own country's decision, not us trying to run the world."

The question of a potential controversy over contraception remains open because Prime Minister Harper and his government have neither ruled it in or out of the plan he is preparing to put on the G8 agenda as its chair this year.

Though Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon (Pontiac, Que.) at one point excluded contraception support as a possibility, Prime Minister Harper and International Cooperation Minister Bev Oda (Durham, Ont.) said the decision had not been taken one way or the other.

"We're not closing the door on any option, including contraception, but we don't want a debate, here or elsewhere, on abortion," Prime Minister Harper told the Commons.

A pastor with a Christian Reformed Church congregation in Prime Minister Harper's Calgary riding said birth control is unlikely to provoke negative reaction in his flock.

"I don't think the Conservative party is in any danger from our people if they included a plan for contraception in their aid to mothers and children," Rev. Curtis Korver told *The Hill Times*. "For some, I think family planning certainly does include an option of abortion, so the words matter, the phraseology matters. Anybody here who will take notice will think that one through; they wouldn't dismiss the whole thing because of a certain phrase."

Rev. Korver, however, said other aspects of Prime Minister Harper's governance are raising eyebrows even in his hometown.

"There's not a whole lot of support for the stimulus package," he said. "I don't think people are as excited about that as the government expected or hoped."

The head of the Canadian ministry for the Christian Reformed Church said the church does not preach against contraception—classifying it as a "private, disputable matter"—but acknowledged it will not be acceptable to members of other churches.

"We would recognize that there are other Christian traditions that are going to find that very problematic," said Canadian ministry director Bruce Adema. "We understand where they're coming from, we understand their arguments, but those really wouldn't be ours."

A spokesman for another national evangelical umbrella group, Focus on the Family, said the organization would not be opposed to financial support for contraception unless it were in the form of an abortifacient—pills that in effect induce abortion shortly after conception.

Dave Quist, director of the Ottawa-based Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, the research and communications arm of Focus on the Family, said, however, that the wording of the plan Prime Minister Harper presents will be crucial. He noted groups like International Planned Parenthood incorporate abortion into the concept of family planning.

"Most church-related people would not include abortion as being part of family planning," said Quist, a former aide to Prime Minister Harper when he was opposition leader. "They would include, probably, contraception of all different sorts, that's probably the two ends of the scale."

Mr. Quist, who lost a 2004 federal election bid with the Conservative party in a British Columbia riding, played down the danger Prime Minister Harper faces as he drifts further to the centre on economic and social measures.

"We have to remember that we've been in a minority government now for a number of elections, so there's always a balancing act," said Mr. Quist. "Whether it's a money bill or a vote of confidence directly, the government, Mr. Harper, in the last several years has had to keep a careful balance there on what will appeal to the parties in the House as well as what will fly with the electorate across the country."