

Grits, Tories at odds over UN aboriginal rights declaration

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Former prime minister Paul Martin says his Liberal government was prepared to adopt the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, contrary to repeated claims by Conservative Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice.

Mr. Martin weighed in amid mounting criticism of the Harper government's position in advance of a UN General Assembly vote on the declaration, which only Canada and Russia opposed during a UN Human Rights Council vote in June 2006. Mr. Prentice has said the former government, like the current one, had concerns about the impact of the declaration on lawfully negotiated treaty rights.

Mr. Martin, however, denies that the Liberals resisted the declaration.

"In terms of what the facts were, we supported it." Indeed, Mr. Martin said, "not only were we prepared to sign (the declaration), but we were strong advocates of it. We were one of the countries that led in an incredibly lengthy negotiation going back years."

Mr. Prentice has also expressed concern the military would not be allowed to conduct evacuations or other operations on aboriginal lands in the event of a crisis or conflict.

But Winnipeg's Celeste McKay, who has represented the Native Women's Association of Canada in declaration negotiations since 2004, dismissed the comments as "fear mongering."

Mr. Martin said he does not want to turn any aboriginal issue into a partisan matter. He does, however, want to underline that the Harper government's opposition to the declaration is a reversal of the previous government's policy.

"Clearly, the current government has its views, and it would appear to me that it's unwilling to defend them and say why it would reverse course in the case of the declaration," Mr. Martin said. Mr. Prentice, travelling overseas, was not available for comment. But his spokeswoman, Deirdra McCracken, denied Mr. Martin's assertion.

"To be clear, no previous Canadian government has ever supported the document in its current form because the wording is inconsistent with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, our Constitution Act, previous Supreme Court decisions, the National Defence Act, and policies under which we negotiate treaties."

The minority Conservative government remains unmoved in the face of a flood of criticism. The three opposition parties, including the Bloc Quebecois, have called for the declaration's adoption.