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Michael Ignatieff courted Julian Fantino but was rebuffed

By Jane Taber
Globe and Mail Update

Liberals confirm they held talks with former top cop as Tories break silence on long-held secret in increasingly nasty by-election campaign

Stephen Harper's star candidate, Julian Fantino, was asked by Michael Ignatieff to run for the Liberals in Vaughan - but turned him down, according to the Conservatives.

Now, on the eve of Monday's vote, the former Toronto police chief and OPP commissioner is being subjected to what the Conservatives consider character assassination by the Liberals.

And so the Tories are fighting back. They are charging hypocrisy and are breaking their silence on a secret they've kept since the beginning of the by-election campaign.

"We were aware from the beginning of the campaign that Mr. Ignatieff asked him to run for the Liberals," Conservative Party spokesman Fred DeLorey said. "We had no intention of making it public - but to see the Liberals actually attack his character and integrity, a man who has committed his career to public service and fighting crime, is just too much.

"The Liberals need to be called out for their hypocrisy."

The Grits confirmed they had spoken to Mr. Fantino but said discussions did not go very far. "Early on, before Maurizio [Bevilacqua, the former Liberal MP in the riding] formally resigned, we spoke to him," a senior Ignatieff official told The Globe on Thursday night. "But nothing ever gelled on either side. We didn't like him, and he didn't like us. So we both moved on.

The official added: "We got the right candidate for Vaughan - Tony [Tony Genco]. And Fantino got Harper. Happy ending all around."

And so the by-election campaign just got nastier, with only days before Monday's vote in the suburban Toronto-area riding. The race between the Liberals and Tories is tight and the stakes are high.

Mr. Harper has given a lot of support to his hand-picked candidate; there is strong speculation Mr. Fantino will go straight to cabinet if he wins. For Mr. Ignatieff, a loss in Vaughan would be troubling as it has been a Liberal seat for 22 years.

For the past week, the Tories and Liberals have been exchanging barbs in the House of Commons, and elsewhere, about Mr. Fantino and his Liberal competitor, Mr. Genco.

The Grits charge that the Prime Minister's Office is keeping Mr. Fantino out of the public eye, given the former police officer has turned down invitations to debate Mr. Genco. Liberals are circulating a YouTube video [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwakc6ngna4>] and still photos [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-notebook/liberals-call-fantinos->

absence-a-stinging-rebuke-to-voters/article1811340] noting Mr. Fantino's absence from a recent all-candidates debate. But the Tories noted he had to attend a mass for his wife's family so wasn't available.

The Conservatives, in turn, have accused Mr. Genco of not releasing past expenses. Public Safety Minister Vic Toews seems to delight in mispronouncing his surname - repeatedly using a hard "G" so that he sounds like some sort of lizard.

And Thursday two Liberals stood up in the Commons to attack Mr. Fantino over his handling of the native protests in Caledonia when he was the OPP commissioner. They noted that Human Resources Minister Diane Finley, whose represents the troubled corner of Ontario, had signed a petition calling for an inquiry into Mr. Fantino's actions.

"The member was a minister when she signed a petition demanding the Prime Minister's hand-picked candidate in Vaughan, Julian Fantino, be investigated. She wanted his pay docked," Toronto MP Maria Minna charged. "She wanted him suspended and she wanted him fired. Does she still hold the same view now?"

And another Toronto Liberal, Rob Oliphant, made a statement concerning Mr. Fantino and Ms. Finley's actions. "If the Minister did not have the confidence of the Prime Minister's hand-picked candidate then, how can she or the Prime Minister expect the voters of Vaughan to have confidence in him now?"

Such is the state of play in federal politics ahead of Monday's by-election.

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