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Liberals draw Finley-Fantino connection

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DELHI -- Local Liberal candidate Bob Speller hopes the federal Conservatives' embrace of former OPP Commissioner Julian Fantino will cost incumbent MP Diane Finley votes in the May 2 federal election.

Speller was unable to attend a town hall meeting Thursday night in Delhi concerning the native occupation of disputed land in Caledonia and the burgeoning trade in illegal cigarettes there. However, Speller had a representative read a prepared statement outlining his stand on the Caledonia situation:

"The only real action the Conservative government has taken with respect to the Caledonia issue was to install Julian Fantino, the former OPP Commissioner, into the Conservative cabinet, in effect endorsing his approach to policing in Caledonia," Herb Ibbotson of Delhi said on Speller's behalf. "What was our present member of parliament's response? She said that issues involving native affairs were not her responsibility."

Many in Caledonia were outraged last fall when Fantino successfully ran as a candidate for the Conservatives in the riding of Vaughan during a federal byelection.

As commissioner of the OPP, Fantino was frequently criticized for failing to protect citizens and property in Caledonia in the face of native violence and intimidation. Meanwhile, Fantino is on the record with attempts to restrict non-native protests over a perceived double standard of law enforcement in Caledonia.

Fantino also sent Haldimand council a threatening email several years ago advising that there would be consequences if council members spoke out on the Caledonia problem in a manner he disapproved of.

"Our present member of parliament is getting away with ignoring this situation," Speller said in his statement. "If the Conservatives are returned to office, how long before Julian Fantino is made public safety minister responsible for all federal law enforcement, including the RCMP? That is not acceptable. A vote for Finley is a vote for Fantino. We need to stop the Conservatives."

Last night's meeting was sponsored by Canadian Advocates for Charter Equality. Spokesperson Gary McHale of Binbrook, an outspoken critic of the Caledonia standoff and the McGuinty government's handling of it, said the Harper government's response to the Caledonia question should cause voters to question the Conservatives' commitment to key planks in their election platform.

McHale, who has had numerous confrontations with Fantino and the OPP over their management of the Caledonia situation, says the Conservatives' embrace of Fantino should cause voters to question Prime Minister Stephen Harper's commitment to a law-and-order agenda.

"It's possible that Fantino is going to be the head of the RCMP," McHale said. "It's possible he's going to be the head of the Canadian Security & Intelligence Service."

By handpicking Fantino, maybe Stephen Harper isn't the law-and-order man he says he is. Maybe, if he's elected with a majority, he won't be there for us like he says he will."

Only 20 people came out to last night's event. All candidates in Haldimand-Norfolk were invited to attend and share their thoughts on Caledonia and the illegal trade in cigarettes that has arisen in the area in makeshift roadside stands. Aside from Speller's prepared statement, the only other candidate to comment was Steve Elgersma, the perennial Christian Heritage Party candidate in Haldimand-Norfolk.

"It's just awful the way it is," Elgersma said of the situation in Caledonia. "I'm with you all the way. I think it is marvelous how Gary McHale stands up to the police."

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