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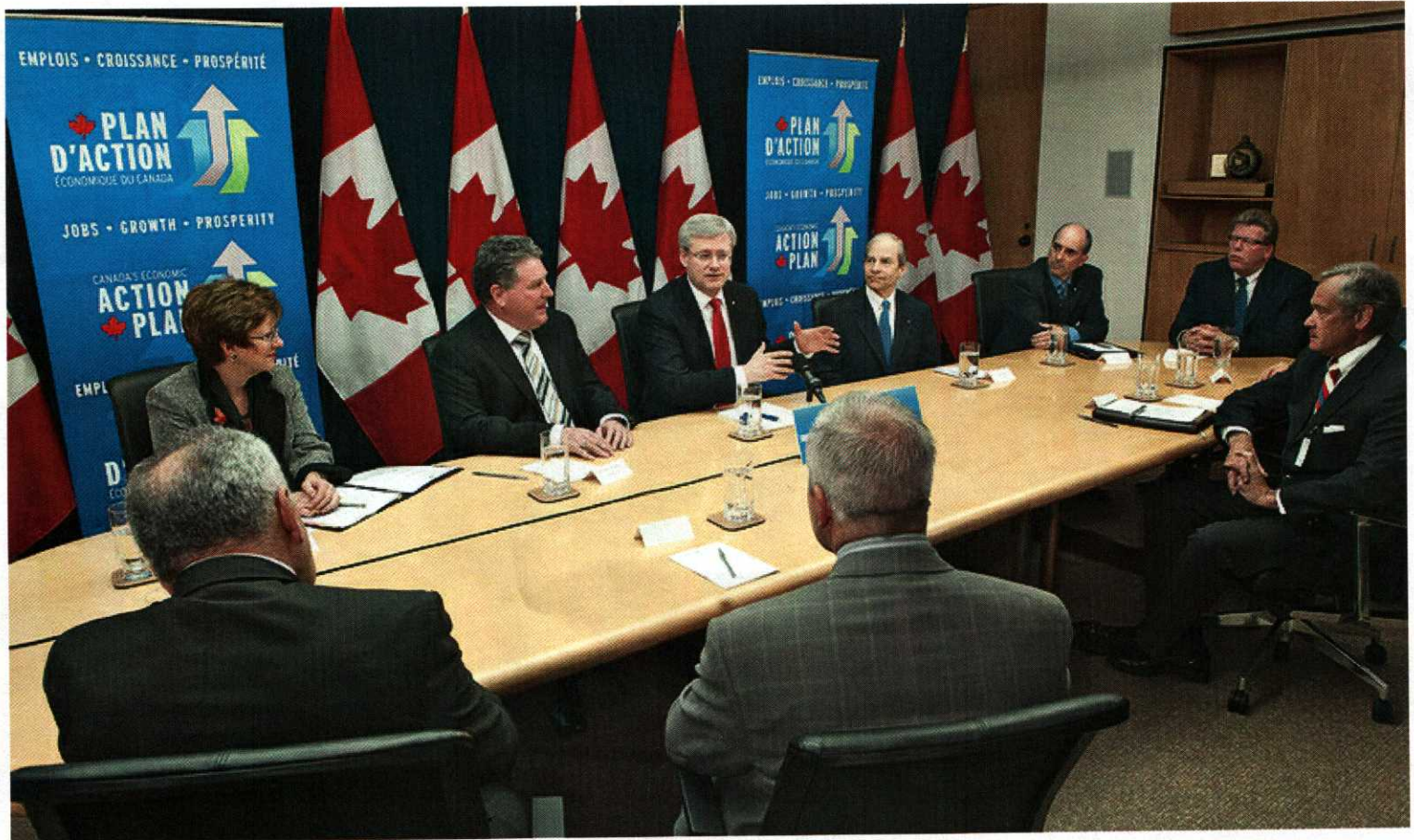
Prime Minister Harper consults with business leaders in Brantford



By Michael-Allan Marion, Brantford Expositor
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Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper (centre) speaks in the board room at SC Johnson in Brantford, Ontario on Friday morning, April 18, 2013. Harper launched the first in a series of consultations with local business leaders on the Canada Job Grant, which will transform the way Canadians receive skills training. Harper was joined by Diane Finley (left), Minister of Human Resources and Skills development, Brant MP Phil McColeman (second from left). BRIAN THOMPSON/BRANTFORD EXPOSITOR/QMI Agency

Prime Minister Stephen Harper used a roundtable of local business executives at the Brantford Canadian headquarters of internationally renowned SC Johnson on Friday to launch a series of consultations with businesses on the Canada Job Grant program.

But aides made it clear that Harper would not take questions from national or local media. They were invited only to listen to some brief prepared introductory remarks from him and take photographs and video footage.

Then they were whisked out of the room.

The morning meeting included Human Resources Minister Diane Finley and Brant MP Phil McColeman, along with Fisk Johnson, CEO of SC Johnson, local builder Peter Vicano, Extend Communications owner Scott Lyons, Tiercel Technology Corp.'s Bruce Seeley, Bill Verity, president of Crown Verity Inc., and Bob deBoer of Brant Screen Craft Inc.

"Canada has one of the best job creation records in the world" even in challenging economic times, Harper told the gathering.

But, he added, there is a mismatch of jobs available and people with skills to meet them.

"We have too many people looking for work and jobs looking for people," he said.

Harper called the Canada Job Grant "a major initiative" with the purpose of making a better match between job seekers and employer needs.

"It will take skills-training choices out of the hands of government and put them where they belong: in the hands of employers with unfilled jobs and Canadians who want to work."

Harper said training in Canada is not sufficiently aligned to the skills employers need or the jobs that are actually available. Meanwhile, he said, there are still too many Canadians looking for work.

Under the Job Grant Program, anyone who has an offer for a new job or a better job may qualify for up to \$15,000 or more to learn new skills to accept it. It will be made up of a \$5,000 maximum federal grant and matching contributions from an employer and province or territory.

Friday's roundtable in Brantford is the first of a series to be held across the county, as part of a renewal of labour market agreements. The detailed design of the grant will be negotiated with provinces and territories over the next year, along with stakeholders which include employer associations, educational institutions and labour organizations.

McColeman won bragging rights to have the first session in Brantford. The Prime Minister's Office issued a competition, in which MPs had to submit proposals that met the criteria of getting out the government's message and bringing in the leaders of medium and large corporations. McColeman's proposal was chosen.

Vicano, who runs the locally prominent Vicano Construction Ltd., liked the session.

"It was an experience of a lifetime to sit across from the Prime Minister and discuss off the cuff what business and industry and the government can do to create jobs," he said.

"There is little relationship between local businesses and the federal government. That's all with the provincial government. But the federal government wanted to know first-hand from employers how to set up the program."

Vicano told the gathering how best to target the program to the needs of construction, an area which hires many skilled tradespeople.

"I get enormous enjoyment out of hiring young men and women with no experience and training them and giving them better skills and good experience.

"My company is a training ground. When someone puts Vicano on their job resume it means something. It gets their foot in the door somewhere else."

He said the Canada Job Plan with its three-way \$15,000 split of contributions has a small but needed federal component.

"It's not a lot of money, in fact in some ways it's more trouble than it's worth," he said. "But it helps get things going and shows the government is serious."

Vicano liked that Harper wanted to hear from small and medium-sized business operators.

"He was taking lots of notes right in front of us as each of us spoke."

Lyons said he likes the government using the roundtables as a tool to ensure that the resulting program will be business driven.

"We can make use of the program for training and staff development."

NDP human resources critic Chris Charlton doesn't believe the Canada Job Plan or the roundtables are going to accomplish much.

"When you're only holding consultations, you're postponing things for a year," she said.

Charlton, MP for Hamilton Mountain, also criticized the government's spin on unemployment as not a jobless crisis but a mismatch of skills.

"It's interesting that when you're listening to the Prime Minister, there's no job crisis.

We have six unemployed people for every job vacancy, and this program doesn't add money, it actually takes away \$300 million from job creation."

It will take more than a year to see how much the Canada Job Grant will help the local employment scene. Right now, the local unemployment rate in Brantford-Brant is holding steady at 7.7% for February and March.

Across the county the rate climbed to 7.2% in March from 7.0% in February. Still, the rate in Brantford-Brant remains higher than the national average.

BrantJobs posted 358 jobs on its job listing website in March. Hiring in manufacturing and processing is currently outpacing other sectors, according to BrantJobs. with demand for warehousing/packaging associates, millwrights and skilled production specialists.

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