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Tories take two in by-elections

By Steven Chase
Globe and Mail Update

Conservatives reclaim Nova Scotia seat, come out on top in rural Quebec; NDP keep B.C. seat

Stephen Harper's Conservatives pulled off an amazing political upset in federal by-elections Monday night, stealing a rural Quebec stronghold seat from the Bloc Quebecois.

The Conservatives also reclaimed a traditionally Tory seat in Nova Scotia, ultimately winning two of the four by-elections held Monday.

The results suggest the minority Conservative government's political fortunes are undimmed by the recession and far stronger than expected in Quebec.

In other races, the NDP handily beat back the Tories to hold on to the Vancouver-area riding of New Westminster-Coquitlam while the Bloc easily reclaimed its Hochelaga seat in urban Montreal.

The surprise Tory victory in the rural Quebec riding of Rivière du-Loup, a long-held Bloc seat, bodes well for Conservative political prospects across the French-speaking province. Political analysts had in the last year written off Tory prospects here, suggesting the party was a spent force.

The balloting offered voters their first opportunity to render judgment on the Harper government and its political rivals after a year of tumult. Since the last election in October, 2008, Canada has been sideswiped by the worst global recession since the Second World War. And last December the three opposition parties failed in a high-stakes bid to form a coalition and unseat Mr. Harper - a move that proved unpopular in the polls.

Conservative Party spokesman Fred DeLorey said the results show Canadians approve of the job they've done in spending stimulus money to ease the recession.

"Governments rarely win by-elections, so we are pleased we were able to win seats in Nova Scotia and Quebec," Mr. DeLorey said.

"It's clear that Canadians approve of the job we're doing.

The by-elections also provide insight into whether recent Conservative gains in the polls represent growing support for a majority Tory government or merely a brief backlash against the opposition Liberals for trying to engineer an unwanted fall election in Canada.

The Nova Scotia seat and the Rivière du-Loup riding are the kinds of constituencies the Tories must be able to win if they want to be able to grow support and secure a majority in the next general election.

For about two months, surveys have suggested support for the Conservatives is approaching levels required to win majority government. The Tories have captured as much as 39 to 40 per cent of the vote in polls with a lead of more than 12 percentage points over the second-place Liberals.

Pollster Nik Nanos said the fact that the Conservatives were even a contender in by-elections - where voters traditionally punish governments - is remarkable.

"Opposition parties usually do better in by-elections. Throw in a recession and it's surprising the opposition parties aren't doing better," Mr. Nanos said.

"Just being able to pick up a seat is good news for the Tories," he said.

The results will likely be difficult for Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff. While his party was never considered a contender for any of these four seats, he will be hard pressed to "put a happy face" on the results, Mr. Nanos said.

Pollster Greg Lyle of Innovative Research Group said the bar for the Liberals will be whether they managed to increase their vote performance over the 2008 election under former leader Stéphane Dion, who ran "one of the weakest Liberal campaigns in history" last time. "If they want momentum they need to beat their numbers from the last election," Mr. Lyle said.

The Conservatives had been the expected front-runner for Nova Scotia's Cumberland-Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley. It's gone Tory blue regularly aside from one swing to the Liberals in 1993 - and it only left the Conservative flock two years ago when former MP Bill Casey parted ways with his government over equalization.

The NDP championed its showing, noting in addition to retaining its Vancouver-area seat, it came second in Montreal's Hochelaga riding to the Bloc and second in the Nova Scotia race to the Tories.

"New Democrats are now the alternative to the Bloc in Montreal and to the Tories in rural Nova Scotia. The initial seeds of an electoral breakthrough for the NDP have been planted tonight," NDP national director Brad Lavigne said.

The NDP had been expected to keep its New Westminster-Coquitlam seat, having turned it into a referendum on the B.C.'s decision to merge its provincial sales tax and the federal goods and services levy. NDP Leader Jack Layton had targeted the shift to the Harmonized Sales Tax, which will raise costs for an estimated one in five consumer goods, because the federal Tories are bankrolling it with \$1.9-billion.

The Conservatives announced a judicial inquiry into disappearing salmon stocks last week in an effort to head off the appeal of the New Westminster-Coquitlam NDP candidate Fin Donnelly, who's twice swam the length of the nearby Fraser River to call attention to the issue.

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