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All parties focused on Vancouver seats

The National Post's series on the resonant issues and interesting races in regions across the country focuses today on suburban Vancouver.

Nathan Vanderklippe, National Post

Published: Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Eric Ernst/Canwest News Service

Liberal MP Raymond Chan, who represents the hotly contested riding of Richmond, B.C., says the riding's outcome in the election will likely go right down to the wire: "Win or lose by 100 votes -- that's ...

An early morning fire alarm clangs to life as Alice Wong walks into a busy Tim Hortons. "It's just a test, no need to go running," says a construction worker seated at one of the tables.

Ms. Wong's eyes light up and she marches to the table, hand outstretched.

Opportunity is afoot, both in the province as a whole -- where pollsters and political strategists say the Liberals face a possible rout -- and directly in front of her.

"I'm running," she says. "I'm running for politics."

She hands over a glossy brochure featuring a picture of Stephen Harper with his arm around her.

"Mr. Harper was here on Day 1 of his campaign," she says, then lists off the brochure's bullet points. "This is why I'm working for you: stronger economy, lower taxes, safer streets."

The alarm stops ringing and she moves on, hustling literature into the hands of those in line -- each time with some variant of "e-mail me. I'm here for you. This is your Canada" -- before wandering into a shopping mall to speak to a handful of Chinese

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retirees doing tai-chi.

It's the retirees who are the real political target in Richmond, a riding dominated by visible minorities, many of them recent immigrants from China. Since 1993, with only one three-and-a-half-year exception, they have voted solidly Liberal, rewarding the party that was in power when many of them settled in Canada.

But the Conservative bloodhounds have been hot on the scent of change since March, when the party's candidate in nearby Vancouver Quadra missed winning a byelection by just 151 votes. Quadra has been solidly red since 1984, and in the past two general elections the Liberal candidate demolished other contenders by 10,000-plus vote margins. The byelection was a radical shift, and poll analysis showed much of the fresh Conservative vote came from areas with strong Chinese populations.

The stage set for a showdown in Richmond, Mr. Harper flew directly to the riding after making his election call and extolled his tax cuts inside the living room of a local family. Mr. Dion responded a week later, using a Richmond Chinese restaurant to unveil his \$800-million pledge to overhaul the country's immigration system.

So far, Mr. Harper appears to be ahead. The Liberals have seen poll numbers well below their 28% share of the popular vote last election while the Conservatives have polled slightly above their 37% finish in 2006.

"It's pretty clear the Liberals are on the ropes in B. C. right now, and something has to change if they want to be able to hold on to what they've got, let alone grow," says Greg Lyle, a pollster with the Innovative Research Group.

Hopes are now running so high for Ms. Wong and a smattering of other blue candidates that Conservative operatives privately predict gains of as many as eight seats for a party that already holds 18 of the province's 36 seats.

"We've got half the seats now in B. C., we're looking for the other half,"

says Colin Metcalfe, a Conservative strategist who points to the last general election, when the party substantially closed the gap on a number of Lower Mainland races.

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"You look at West Vancouver, where we lost by under 1,000 votes, look at the North Island, where we lost by a similar amount. There are some key seats that we hope to get back," he says.

The NDP, too, is salivating over possible gains. Bolstered by the past two general elections, which saw it rocket from two seats to 10, the party has moved ahead of the Liberals in provincial polls and says another increase is within reach.

"In B. C., the NDP has really made substantial gains in the last couple of elections, and we think we can again," says Gerry Scott, the NDP's B. C. campaign manager. Promising better transit and criticizing the Conservatives for their softwood lumber deal and inattention to the trouble wracking the forestry industry, the New Democrats have their hopes high for Conservative-held Kamloops and Port Kells and Liberal-held Newton-North Delta.

Other parties say the NDP is in turmoil after having to drop two of its candidates in the province after pot and nudity revelations. Mr. Scott, however, is focused on the Liberals and their seven seats.

"They could lose most of the seats they have, in my view, to either Conservatives or New Democrats," he says. "I don't think there's a safe Liberal seat in this province."

All of which means one thing: Candidates such as Raymond Chan have a big target on their backs.

Richmond's Liberal candidate -- and Ms. Wong's chief opponent -- Mr. Chan was first elected in 1993 after he spent 10 months in shopping malls shaking so many hands that people started telling him to go home and get some rest.

He's still at it. Standing at the entrance to a Safeway this week, he thrusts brochures upon everyone walking by. Last election, he shook 20,000 hands. He plans to do the

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same this time, but admits the stakes are higher.

"It is the fight of my life. You better believe it," he says, and adds some urgency to his pitch.

"We need help. Very tight -- win or lose by 100 votes. That's how close it is," he says to a passerby.

Yet if Mr. Chan is worried about finishing on the losing end of those votes, he gives little indication of it. Promising that he "can out-campaign anybody," he says there are two reasons voters will keep their distance from the Conservatives.

First, the Green Shift, which he says appeals to those who recognize that Canada's future welfare depends on moving to an environmentally progressive economy. Second, he disputes polls showing a voter preference for Mr. Harper.

In fact, the Liberals, too, are predicting more seats this time around: They expect to get back Kingsway from David Emerson, who is not running, and are predicting a "sweep" of the three seats on lower Vancouver Island, and see Vancouver's eastern suburbs as a land of "significant opportunity."

"We're expecting pickup in seats held primarily by New Democrats and the odd Conservative," says Liberal spokesman Brad Zubyk.

But if arithmetic dictates that all of those party predictions don't compute, the province's battles do add up to at least one thing: a potential election night drama.

"The election is close enough that B. C. could be the difference between a majority or minority," says Mr. Lyle, the pollster. "People could be sitting on the edge of their seats in the East waiting to see how B. C. votes, and that's always fun."

nvanderklippe@nationalpost.com

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