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Wildrose Alliance has heady advice for B.C. Tories

By Ian Bailey
From Friday's Globe and Mail

Party leader says conservatives must run on a broad platform

Memo from Danielle Smith, rookie leader of Alberta's Wildrose Alliance Party, to B.C. Conservatives: Run a vigorous, open race to elect your next leader. You need seats in the legislature, even one, to be a credible political force.

And you need to embrace issues that are going to appeal to the broadest array of voters.

"If you're trying to build a movement around single issues, you're going to fail," Ms. Smith said in an interview from Calgary this week about parallels between politics in B.C. and Alberta.

"The issues you go into the campaign on must, absolutely must, be ones that the broad majority of voters can understand and care about."

One major ongoing what-if of B.C. politics, likely to linger as long as the governing centre-right Liberals are in a polling slump, is the possibility of the regional B.C. Conservatives getting their act together, and coalescing to pry away the support of Liberals disappointed with such policies as the new harmonized sales tax and the soaring deficit.

Hope has sprung eternal for the hard-luck B.C. Conservatives, who have not held a seat since 1986. Formed in 1902, the party governed B.C. under premiers Richard McBride - a 12-year run - followed by William Bowser and Simon Tolmie. In the 1940s, the Conservatives were part of a governing coalition, but they have been in the political wilderness since that arrangement broke up in the 1950s - supplanted by Social Credit, then the Liberals as the right-wing party in B.C. politics.

In the provincial election this year, they drew single digits in voter support, but they aren't giving up. At a September meeting, they approved a new party constitution and hope to elect a new leader next year.

Ms. Smith is a fan of Gordon Campbell and Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall - through his Saskatchewan Party - for forging conservative political movements that have been successful. As a business lobbyist, she admired Mr. Campbell's policies on regulatory reform in particular.

But friends in B.C. have kept her up-to-date on current events on this side of the Rockies, and she sees parallels with what's going on in her province, where some conservative voters have lost faith with the Conservative Party that should be their political home.

"The B.C. Liberals could be in danger of the same problem our current government here in Alberta is in - the danger of drift," she said. "When a government has been in power for a number of terms, they start not necessarily following some of the same principles and ideology and ideas that got them into government."

Critics in B.C., seizing on this point, have noted the HST and the deficit, but Mr. Campbell also came in for blistering criticism due to his adoption of a carbon tax. "In British Columbia, there's quite a conservative vacuum," said Wayne McGrath, president of the BC Conservative Party.

Conservatives fiercely fighting conservatives for the conservative vote: That basic dynamic has drawn national attention to Alberta where Ms. Smith, a charismatic former broadcaster, is laying the groundwork to try to oust the Progressive Conservative Party that has governed Alberta since 1971 - the year she was born.

The Wildrose Alliance meshes the Wildrose Party and the Alberta Alliance Party. In Alberta's 2008 provincial election, it lost its only seat as the PCs won 72 of 83 legislature seats.

But things have been looking up for Wildrose Alliance since it won a Calgary by-election in September, riding unease about a \$6.9-billion provincial deficit and the leadership skills of Premier Ed Stelmach.

A poll out this week has Alberta's Tories overall at their lowest level of popular support in 16 years, only slightly ahead of the Wildrose Alliance, which has edged ahead of the Conservatives in Calgary - a bedrock area for the governing party. The next election is expected in 2012.

So what about the B.C. Conservatives?

Branch parties in B.C. are not on the Wildrose Alliance agenda, but Ms. Smith, asked about the topic, had some cautious advice: Start with a legislature seat.

"You need to be able to win a seat for people to look at your party as a winning party," she said. "There have been many, many small parties that have started off that have had very difficult times getting any traction in the media or with the voters because they have not been able to pass that benchmark."

B.C. Conservatives are planning for a leadership race next year. "The key will be, for them, having credible candidates come forward who want the prize. If it's a coronation, the guy who becomes the leader is leader because no one else wanted it," Ms. Smith said.

"The way you rejuvenate a party is through an exciting, contested leadership race."

Mr. McGrath is soberly optimistic. In an interview, he said the recent meeting left him with a good feeling about the party making the most of Liberal troubles. The Alberta situation, he said, has "some relevance" to B.C. affairs.

But he said the party may have credibility issues attracting leadership candidates.

Pollster Greg Lyle, a former campaign manager for Mr. Campbell, said disaffection with the B.C. Liberals opens doors for the Conservatives.

"It's not hard to imagine a road where there's a breakthrough for them; where they can actually be a contender for government if they can get the right leader and fight the right issues," Mr. Lyle said. "It's not the likely scenario, but it's a possible scenario, and they're only going to do well if they dare to dream the big dream."

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