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The Hill Times, August 11th, 2008
NEWS STORY
By Harris MacLeod

Close race in Guelph shaping up as a tough test of Dion's Green Shift plan

A strong NDP candidate and a divided green vote could hurt the Liberals in the riding, says pollster

St  phane Dion's risky Green Shift plan is about to face its toughest test yet in the too-close-to-call Guelph byelection, where the Liberals say the top issue for voters is the environment and the Tories say it's taxation.

"I think the Green Shift is big, and I think the government's record is big, and I think it will be a duel between those two big things," Innovative Research pollster Greg Lyle said in an interview. "If [the Conservatives] do narrow the gap, the reason they're going to narrow the gap is very likely going to be the carbon tax proposal."

The close race for the riding is significant because it will test the people of Guelph--which he said is the type of Ontario riding where both the Liberals and Conservatives want to make gains--on what they think of each of the parties' platforms, performances, and organizational strength.

The by-election in the Southern Ontario riding of Guelph is being held to fill the seat left vacant by former Liberal MP Brenda Chamberlain, who has resigned. It is one of three byelections being held on Sept. 8 (the other two are in Quebec) and the Conservative, Liberal, NDP, and Green parties are campaigning hard in the riding in the hopes that a strong showing will be a good sign in advance of the next general election, which many are forecasting for the fall.

The winner of the riding will be particularly emboldened in the province of Ontario, the most seat-rich province in the Country. With 106 ridings in the province, 51 are currently held by the Liberals, 41 are Conservative, and 12 are NDP.

Mr. Dion's (Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, Que.) carbon tax proposal has quickly become a hot item for debate in the campaign. The Liberal candidate, local lawyer and former school board member Frank Valeriotte, said the environment is a big issue for people in Guelph and that once his party's environmental taxation plan is explained to them, they "embrace" it.

"They want to know more. Mr. Dion came here and spoke on the Green Shift on July 10, and the room was filled to capacity to the extent that we had to open up one of the doors so as to flood into another room. There were 300 people listening to him about the Green Shift, and they came out feeling very positive about it and feeling informed about it," he said.

Conservative candidate Gloria Kovach, who served on Guelph's city council for 17 years, said the environment is "obviously important," however she said people are telling her the issue they are most concerned about is taxation. "They are aware of the extra taxes that Mr. Dion is proposing. They are concerned about what that's going to do," she said.

The candidates, with the exception of Ms. Kovach, said they are hoping to capitalize on the small 'g' green vote in the riding; however they all expressed concern that it could be



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split three ways, among the Liberals, NDP, and the Greens.

"In honesty, yes, I am concerned that the centre and centre left, when it comes to the environment, are not going to focus on making sure that a party is elected, actually elected, that can actually do something about the environment, and I believe that that's the Liberal Party. It's the party most likely to replace the Conservatives, and yes, I am concerned that if they split the vote, the Conservatives could win the centre and frankly, on the day after the election, it will be too late to say I told you so," said Mr. Valeriote.

Former CBC Radio host and author Tom King, who is the NDP candidate, takes issue with the Liberal Party's claim that the Green Shift will be revenue neutral. "I don't think anybody really understands it at this point. The most confusing part of it for me is that the Liberals call this a revenue neutral bill, which means that the amount of money that comes into the program goes back out of the program. So it's sort of like passing money from your left pocket to your right pocket, but I know enough about Ottawa and Ottawa's digestive track to know that if you pass money through it, it doesn't come out the same as it went in," Mr. King said.

"It's like a man who has a horse and feeds hay to the horse and stands under the back end of the horse hoping to get the same amount of hay out that he put in, and it just doesn't happen. So revenue neutral, in terms of Ottawa, is a myth."

Mr. Lyle said the seat is "a very plausible Tory seat," the kind that of "small town semi-suburban belt that surrounds the GTA." He also pointed to Tory MP Michael Chong's (Wellington-Halton Hills, Ont.) neighbouring riding. "You would expect that if the Tories have any prospect of making gains, that they're going to be able to narrow the gap there," he said. "If they do win then they're going to be really bullish on a fall election."

Mr. Lyle said, however, that he doesn't believe the NDP, nor the Green Party has a hope of winning in Guelph, and Mr. Valeriote should be concerned about losing votes to the NDP, who are heralding Mr. King as a so-called star candidate. "It's trouble for the Liberals. A resurgent NDP candidate is not going to pull Tory votes. So if you're nervous about the Liberals and you don't like the Tories, and you've got a live option in the NDP, that's bad news for the Liberals."

But Mr. Lyle added that, although the Liberals have the most to lose in Guelph, success in the riding could be a sign that Ontario voters are open to the Green Shift idea. "If they can hold off the Tories, if they hold off those third parties, if they rally Liberals because they're for something, they're not just against things, and they're for something that is a sort of centre-left exciting idea, then this could be good news for them too. If I were them, I wouldn't be sitting back going, 'Well, look at all the ways I can lose.' I'd be getting excited about having an idea that I can sell and getting behind that, full steam ahead."

NDP leader Jack Layton (Toronto-Danforth, Ont.) was in Guelph on Friday with Mr. King to make an announcement about his party's opposition to new text messaging fees, and Green Party leader Elizabeth May is in the riding on Monday of this week to hold a press conference on the party's platform.

While the candidates are eager to debate the merits of the Liberal plan, they are all emphasizing their merits as individual candidates as a major part of their campaign strategy. "I think possibly it's going to be more about the individuals and the person best qualified to be an MP. This is not going to change the balance of power in Ottawa, so I think people can look at the individual candidates and say, 'I'm going to vote for this person,' because they think they're the best one for the job regardless of party. Whether that happens or not, I don't know. It may be that the electorate sort of snaps back to brand-name politics voting, but I would hope that it might move off of that and take the candidates just on their own," said Mr. King.

Mr. Lyle said, however, that he believes the by-election will be fought on party politics, and not the strength of the individual candidates. "It would be very unlikely for Guelph to disconnect itself from the national stage, especially since there's increasing amounts of speculation about a fall election. Remember most people don't vote in by-elections; if our general election turnouts are barely breaking 50 [per cent], a by-election turnout at 30 [per cent] is really good. So you're talking about the 30 per cent that pays the most attention to politics, those people are traditionally a lot more partisan than the average person is, so they're a lot more likely to vote party, they're better informed than the average person is. It's not a good situation for a really unique Chuck Cadman sort of scenario."

Even if the candidates are saying it's their individual strengths that matter, each of the national parties are doing their part to influence the outcome. For instance, the Conservatives have been flooding the riding with 10 per centers (House of Commons-funded campaign literature) from other ridings, some of them criticizing Mr. Dion's carbon tax plan. High-profile MPs from the NDP, Liberals and Conservatives have also visited the riding to show support.

"Jack Layton is here every week. So yes, there is a lot of national help. Ours is a truly



local campaign and we do have obviously some people coming to help from outside, but 95 per cent of our team, and all the decisions are made in Guelph by me and by our team, and so yes, we're seeing a lot of outside influence from the other parties," said Green Party candidate Mike Nagy, who is hoping to make an "historic" breakthrough in the riding.

Both Mr. King and Mr. Valeriotte said their campaign signs have been vandalized. Mr. Valeriotte said a number of his signs have had swastikas drawn on them, and one was burned, and Mr. King said vandals have pasted American flags on some of his signs. "We have had a fairly fierce campaign on sign destruction. I don't know where that came from. Of course nobody has any idea who's doing it. I think there was somebody arrested the other day for taking signs out. It's been reasonably serious actually, I mean the signs are expensive and quite a few of them have been kicked over and messed up," said Mr. King.

Mr. Valeriotte, along with Mr. King and Mr. Nagy, also expressed dismay that, because the by-election will happen at the beginning of September, most of Guelph's university students will not be able to vote. "I am discouraged by that. I know that the Prime Minister has to be strategic and any strategy he employs is going to be in his favour and not anybody else's, so of course in the summer people don't have their mind on politics. They'll have their mind on holidays and the Olympics, and he chose a day just when universities return to school. A number of students have expressed disappointment, but it's mostly first-year students who will feel disenfranchised," said Mr. Valeriotte.

Mr. Lyle said he doesn't think the fact that Guelph is a so-called university town means that it is necessarily inclined to elect a left-of-centre candidate. "I think if that was true then [the Conservatives] would have been killed in Quadra. Quadra is UBC. If that were true, we would not have seen the result we saw in Quadra. You have to remember [Guelph has] a university that has a vet school. If there was going to be a university town that would go Tory this is the one."

Mr. Lyle said that though winning Guelph riding will be a coup for the victorious party, the significance of the by-election should not be overstated. "You can't generalize from a by-election. Presumably the Tories are going to put their very best face forward, and so are the Liberals, and they're going to have the support of the central campaigns for the province and are going to have the full support of the ridings surrounding it, so they're going to have a disproportionate amount of resources. They should be able to do a much better job than you can traditionally do in an election," he said.

"We'll all be very, very excited about it in the days up to the byelection, and two days following the byelection, we'll promptly forget about it."

This story is the first in a series of campaign profiles in advance of the three byelections on Sept. 8. In the coming weeks Harris MacLeod and Cynthia Munster will profile the races in the Quebec ridings of Saint-Lambert, Que., and Westmount-Ville-Marie.

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