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The Hill Times, April 28th, 2008

NEWS STORY
By Abbas Rana

Liberal grassroots energized, but top Grits say no decision on an election, yet

But Grits could have own problems as RCMP sets sights on Liberal Party hierarchy too.

After a long spell of hopelessness about their political fortunes, grassroots Liberals are feeling re-energized following the RCMP raid at the Conservative Party headquarters in Ottawa and want to go to the polls as soon as possible, but senior Liberals are saying that no decision has been made and are arguing that it might be a good idea to wait in the hope that Elections Canada may lay criminal charges against some Conservatives relating to the "in and out" scheme on election financing.

"My own view is that if the government were to rush to an election next week, they may, for example, prevent the Procedure and House Affairs Committee from calling witnesses. They certainly [have] been successful in trying to prevent that for eight months. The dissolution of Parliament would be a way for them to avoid that. Ultimately, the investigation by Elections Canada may lead to the laying of charges, which would lead to a trial. That's a very different process than simply an investigation as well, much more serious. So, our view is that Mr. Harper shouldn't be allowed off the hook by rushing into an election," Liberal MP Dominic LeBlanc (Beaus  jour, N.B.) his party's justice critic, said at a press conference on the Conservative "in and out" election financing scheme last week in Ottawa.

"On the other hand, if this issue and a number of others cumulate and we decide that we no longer have confidence in the government and the other opposition parties join us in that vote, then we'll be ready for the election," he said.

At the press conference on April 24 at the National Press Theatre, Mr. LeBlanc said that the Conservative "in and out" election financing scheme in the last federal election appears to be more serious and widespread than initially thought and that the RCMP should launch an investigation to examine the accounting system that the Tories used during the 2006 election campaign.

Grassroots Liberals interviewed last week said that following the RCMP raid on the Tory Party headquarters, they're feeling that "they're back in it."

"Liberals who were demoralized, they were ready to quit, they were like we're not participating in the next election, and then the raid happened and everyone's ready now. Before you'd talk to people and they'd say, 'We're screwed, we need a new leader, we wasted all this money on the convention.' Now people are like, 'Let's go, let's go.' People smell that the Conservatives are in trouble and there's a chance for us to get back. There's a feeling we're back in it," said one Liberal based in Toronto.

According to an online poll conducted last week by Innovative Research Group for *The Hill Times*, 52 per cent of Canadians said they would be less likely to vote for the Conservative Party if it is confirmed that the Tories did commit some irregularities in their spending in the last federal election and 41 per cent polled said that the outcome of the investigation won't have any effect on their voting decision in the next election.

The poll revealed that 82 per cent of those surveyed said that they have heard about the "in and out" election financing investigation and 59 per cent of those said that, as a result, they have a less favourable view of the Harper Tories, while 36 per cent said the investigation into the party's advertising spending made no difference in their opinion



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about the party.

Pollster Greg Lyle, director of Innovative Research Group, in an interview last week pointed out that the awareness of the "in and out" investigation is significantly high and that it's likely to impact the Conservatives' ability to grow, but the political impact right now is not very serious.

"The awareness is high—80 per cent, that's very high. If we look at the impact, the worrying thing for the Conservatives in this is not that [supporters for the] other parties say they're less likely to vote Tory, but it's that the undecided say they're less likely to vote Tory. The Tories are not all that fussed about it, so it doesn't look like this is particularly impacting the base, but it is limiting their ability to grow, since they don't have enough votes to win a majority yet," he said.

"That's problematic but it's not a crisis. On the other hand, if we look at the question on how do you perceive the Conservatives, are they like everyone else, or are they better or worse? There are more people that say worse than better, but the worse people are all people voting for other parties," he said.

The poll also showed that one in four Conservative voters and more than half of the undecided are left with a less favourable impression of the Conservative Party. And one in six Conservatives said that if the Conservatives were found guilty of violating election law, they would be less likely to vote for the Conservative Party.

Contrary to the widely-held belief that the Conservatives won the last election on their platform of accountability and transparency, 56 per cent of people polled said that the Tories won the last election for the public's desire for change, 23 per cent said that the Conservatives won because of a variety of issues that unfolded during the campaign, and only 14 per cent gave credit to a Conservative win on the platform of accountability and transparency.

On the question of ethics, 52 per cent of respondents opined that the Conservatives are the same as other parties, 29 per cent said that Tories are worse than most political parties and 16 per cent said they are better than most political parties.

The online survey was conducted between April 22 and April 25, in which 1,167 people were polled. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

In answering a question about the raid on the Tory headquarters in Ottawa, Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) last week said: "Elections Canada thinks that some of our local expenditures should be considered as national expenses and we do not agree with that, and that's why we went to court with this issue and in the interim we will respect the law and the interpretations of the law."

In his speeches in Quebec, he mostly ignored the issue and focused mainly on economy and talked about the need to prepare the country for uncertain economic times in future.

Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre (Nepean-Carleton, Ont.) in his media interviews last week criticized Elections Canada for investigating the Tories.

"This whole legal dispute involves Conservative candidates spending Conservative funds on Conservative advertising," Mr. Poilievre told CTV last week. "Elections Canada wants the power to determine what constitutes a local advertisement and what constitutes a national one. But to do that, they have to dictate what local candidates are allowed to put in their advertising materials," he said. "We think that in a free country, candidates decide what goes in their materials, and not a government bureaucrat."

Former Liberal MP Joe Jordan, a lobbyist with the Capital Hill Group in Ottawa and a longtime Liberal strategist, said in an interview last week that the RCMP raid has certainly boosted the morale of the Liberal Party and that the Liberal leadership will definitely take this factor into account before making a decision on when to pull the plug.

"Parties take this stuff into consideration. Anybody that tells you they don't is either very naïve or very stupid. In a minority situation, they don't control everything, but you sit around and you try and figure out what your chances of electoral success are. That's the job of the political arm of the party. That's pretty transparent. Has this increased the chances of doing better in an election for the Liberals? You'd be silly to think that it didn't," he said.

But Mr. Jordan said that it remains to be seen whether the "in and out" scheme alone is adequate enough to trigger an election and then do well at the ballot box.

"That's a bit of a crapshoot. In the court of public opinion, the damage is done. If that was the only issue [of the next campaign], you could make an argument for going now, but certainly that's not the only issue," he said.



Meanwhile, media reports suggested last week that Liberals could face their own problems with a criminal investigation into the sponsorship scandal in Quebec in the coming weeks. The sponsorship scandal was one of the key factors in the Liberal Party's loss in the last federal election, especially in Quebec, but also in the rest of the country. Earlier this month, the RCMP arrested and charged Benoît Corbeil, former director general of the Quebec wing of the federal Liberal Party, with influence peddling, fraud, and conspiracy against the party and the federal government between 1997 and 2000.

The *Globe and Mail* reported on April 25 that the police have almost finished probing advertising firms involved in the sponsorship scandal and are moving on to allegations of corruption against Liberal officials. Citing unnamed sources, the paper reported that the RCMP is hoping to go higher up the Liberal hierarchy than Mr. Corbeil.

If more Liberals are arrested in the sponsorship scandal, this could mean bad news for the Liberals because, if they go after the Conservatives on the "in and out" scheme, Tories will remind Canadians of the sponsorship scandal.

"I don't think they [Liberals] can run a full campaign on the corruption stuff. They're going to neutralize that with sponsorship, sponsorship, sponsorship. In provinces like Quebec, what's the impact? I don't think that the Liberals have dug themselves out of the hole in Quebec. It will probably take at least one more election, and I don't think they can do anything better than have a shot at a minority if they can't win Quebec," said another Liberal source.

However, the scenario is beneficial for the NDP in the next election campaign as they can attack both Conservatives and the Liberals on accountability and trust.

"This is the perfect issue for Jack Layton [Toronto-Danforth, Ont.] and the New Democrats because they're the one party that can attack the Conservatives and at the same time they can attack the Liberals on trust and ethics. This is tailor-made for Jack Layton. It might be a bit of an opportunity for him to kind of jump start NDP support. For the Liberals, it's a little more difficult because whenever they attack the Conservatives on this, Conservatives throw back at the Liberals the advertising and sponsorship scandal," Nik Nanos, president of Nanos Research, told *The Hill Times* two weeks ago.

Meanwhile, another factor that is making matters more complicated for the Liberals is the immigration reform legislation introduced by the Harper Conservatives in the House in mid-March, which is designed to give more discretion to the minister of Citizenship and Immigration to pick and choose which category of applicants to fast track or block.

Liberal sources told *The Hill Times* that Liberal MPs from urban ridings have been pushing their leader to bring down the government on immigration reforms, saying that immigrants are the bedrock of the party support and they're not happy about the Conservative reforms. But the raid on the Conservative Party headquarters and the possibility of more arrests in Quebec on the sponsorship program could change that dynamic. Conservatives have attached the immigration reform bill to the Budget Implementation Bill, which means a Liberal vote against it could defeat the government.

The NDP, meanwhile, is aggressively courting the immigrant community in urban ridings on the immigration reforms. They're meeting members of urban ethnic communities across the country and reminding them that their party is not only speaking up against the reforms but will also vote against them in the House, while the Liberals are only opposing it rhetorically. Currently, this legislation is before the Commons' Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for a detailed review.

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