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Tories set sights on winning 12 more seats in next election

By KRISTEN SHANE

Political observers say the Conservatives are cultivating star candidates, exploiting wedge issues, targeting seats where incumbents aren't running and greasing the wheels through funding announcements in ridings in Newfoundland, British Columbia and Ontario, among others, to win the 12 seats they need to form a majority government.

Assuming they win 143 seats they already represent, the Tories only need a dozen more seats to push them over the edge to a majority.

"Many of the ridings that the former Progressive Conservatives had in 1988 under Brian Mulroney would probably be the best targets likely of the Harper Conservatives. So that would be the Mississaugas, for example, the Don Valleys in Toronto, southwestern Ontario, and the Lower Mainland in B.C.," pollster Nik Nanos told *The Hill Times* last week.

"Beyond that, the Conservatives would probably be hoping to geographically expand their base in the Québec City region," Mr. Nanos said.

That could be difficult given the question of whether the federal government will chip in part of the bill for a new hockey arena in Québec City.

"If the arena doesn't get [federal] funding, it will help the Bloc Québécois. It will give them ammunition. It's a bit of a tricky situation for the Conservatives because if they do give money to the arena or are perceived as helping out the arena, it will hurt their own base...in Western Canada. [For the base] this is the worst possible thing a government can do: spend money to appease nationalists in Quebec," said Gerry Nicholls, a political strategist who used to work with Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) at the National Citizens Coalition.

In Montreal, Conservative Senator Larry Smith has said he'll run as a Conservative candidate for the city in the next election. The former CEO of the Montreal Alouettes football team would be a star candidate facing a tough battle. The island of Montreal has always been a tough region for the Conservatives to crack, said Mr. Nanos. And Sen. Smith may heed the experience of another Conservative Senator for Montreal. Mr. Harper gave former Senator Michael Fortier a Cabinet spot. Mr. Fortier later resigned to run as a star candidate for a riding just outside of Montreal, Vaudreuil-Soulanges, Que., and lost.

Commentators are placing more sure hopes on Conservatives picking up about two seats in Newfoundland. Liberal Siobhan Coady (St. John's South-Mount Pearl), is fighting hard to defend a traditionally Conservative riding. She had a lot of help in the 2008 election from provincial Conservatives who were waging an Anything But Conservative campaign against Prime Minister Harper's party for what they perceived to be a slight against Newfoundland in the equalization formula.



"Last time, [former populist Newfoundland premier] Danny Williams was shitting on them from high heights. That's not happening anymore," said one 20-year Ottawa insider who asked not to be named to protect his job.

Other potentially vulnerable MPs include the NDP's Jack Harris (St. John's East), who won by a large margin last time but is in another historically Conservative riding; and Liberal Scott Andrews (Avalon).

With Mr. Williams now retired from provincial politics, "The winds of change certainly have blown through our version of the emerald island," said the source.

Mr. Nanos also pointed to Newfoundland and Saskatchewan in noting that people are more likely to look favourably on the government of the day if their provincial economies are doing well.

Other Atlantic ridings to watch include Liberal Mark Eyking's in Sydney-Victoria, N.S., said the insider. While the Conservatives came in third in the last election, 28.8 per cent behind Mr. Eyking, locally successful MLA Cecil Clarke announced last summer he would like to seek the nomination for the Conservatives there. *The Cape Breton Post* said last month "[Clarke] could well be the strongest candidate to go up against Eyking since 2000 when Eyking defeated incumbent Peter Mancini of the NDP."

In New Brunswick, former Progressive Conservative premier Bernard Lord has long been rumoured to make a return to politics. He left his premiership in 2006 at age 41 after suffering only a marginal loss in that year's provincial election. The province is now once again in Conservative hands provincially.

In the West, observers clearly point to NDP MP Linda Duncan's Edmonton-Strathcona seat, the lone riding the Tories don't hold in Alberta, to be on the Conservative hit lists.

The Conservatives could leverage the control they have over surrounding seats to spend money on advertising that would infiltrate that riding, said Mr. Nanos.

Next door in British Columbia, Greg Lyle, a pollster with Toronto-based Innovative Research Group Inc., said the Conservatives could have a chance at flipping Liberal MP Ujjal Dosanjh's Vancouver South riding, which the Conservatives lost by only 20 votes last time.

"[Mr. Dosanjh] will put up the good fight. He knows they're coming for him this time," said Mr. Lyle, a former strategist for Kim Campbell's Progressive Conservative leadership campaign. "But the Chinese vote in Vancouver has been shifting Conservative pretty steadily."

Twenty-nine per cent of Vancouver's population is of Chinese descent, according to 2006 census figures.

Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca, B.C., is another sure-to-be-tight race the Conservatives will be gunning to win. Longtime incumbent Keith Martin won it for the Liberals in 2008 with only 68 votes over the nearest competitor, Conservative Troy DeSouza. Mr. DeSouza looks set to run again, while Mr. Martin is not. It has a strong NDP base provincially, said Mr. Lyle, but a big military base that should help the Conservative vote.

In Ontario's key GTA battlefield, the Conservatives have a better chance than in years prior, said Mr. Lyle.

"The Rob Ford campaign [for Toronto mayor, which he won last fall] showed that the 416 is not a fortress for Liberals," he said. Mr. Ford, a Conservative, got half the vote with a 50 per cent turnout in every part of the city outside of the old City of Toronto limits, he said.

"In previous elections we would have simply written 416 off.... This time, you have to look at any seat with Etobicoke or Scarborough in the name and say, 'Well, maybe they could do it,'" said Mr. Lyle.

In the southwest side of the city, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, Alta.) has been waging an outreach campaign in new Canadian communities that is "absolutely huge" to Conservative prospects, said Mr. Lyle.

Ontario voters don't necessarily distinguish between federal and Conservative issues, said Mr. Nicholls. If the next federal election is this spring, the Conservatives may take advantage of dissatisfaction of current Liberal Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty in the lead-up to the province's election this fall, he said.

On the flip side, said Mr. Nanos, if the Ontario election leads to a Progressive Conservative victory, the federal Conservatives could use their wins as a blueprint of where they should target resources in the next federal election.

Although they say they don't want it, it looks like the Conservatives are preparing for an election this spring, said Mr. Nanos.

"They've been running negative attacks ads. Look at their recent...national campaign, in terms of 80 MPs and Senators fanning out around the country to talk about Conservative accomplishments. Those are all signals that the Conservatives are gearing up for an election," he said.

And they're marking the territory they want to conquer, said the insider. "Look where the Prime Minister goes. That's the clearest signal of where they think they can make some gains."

Last week, Mr. Harper swooped into Vancouver, Victoria and Sidney B.C., in Liberal ridings, as well as a Bloc riding in Val d'Or, Que. Mr. Harper, alongside Defence Minister Peter MacKay (Central Nova, N.S.), announced a new helicopter facility at CFB Esquimalt in Mr. Martin's riding. It was among more than \$309-million worth of spending announcements in more than 100 ridings the government made last week.

It fits Mr. Lyle's hunch that the Conservatives need to 'go local' to win. The key is to fight the next election like 308 byelections and not one general election by connecting with people on the ground and trying to ensure they know a Conservative MP would fight for them, he said.

In the same way, said Mr. Nanos, "The gun registry issue is not necessarily a national issue of concern...but it could be a key ballot issue in pockets of ridings across the country."

The Conservatives would likely focus on heavily rural ridings held by the opposition as pick-ups, he said. Vulnerable regions include Liberal MP Larry Bagnell in the Yukon and NDP ridings in rural northern Ontario.

The "stars are aligning" for the Conservatives, said Mr. Nicholls. They're doing well in the polls and the economy seems better.

If the Canadian economy is stable or grows, it may mean a political dividend for Mr. Harper, said Mr. Nanos, and now it is relatively stable.

Meanwhile, said Mr. Lyle, the Liberals are starting to get their act together.

If an election doesn't happen this spring, it may not occur until the next scheduled election date in fall 2012 because Ontario is set to have a provincial election this fall and Quebec could go to the polls in the spring of 2012. Parties need to consider volunteer and fundraising fatigue in waging a federal and provincial election at the same time, said Mr. Nanos.

Give the Liberals another year, and they'll get better, said Mr. Lyle.

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