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Falcon set to join Liberal leadership race

By PATRICK BRET HOUR and IAN BAILEY
From Monday's Globe and Mail

Health Minister's campaign to be launched Tuesday in Surrey

Health Minister Kevin Falcon will jump into the B.C. Liberal leadership race on Tuesday in Surrey - and again later in the day in Prince George.

A source close to Mr. Falcon's nascent campaign confirmed that a press conference called for Tuesday morning will be the official launch of his expected leadership bid. Mr. Falcon will appear again in Prince George Tuesday evening.

The double-barrelled launch points to Mr. Falcon's intention to woo the rural heartland of the province - and is a counterthrust to leadership rival George Abbott, who hails from Sicamous, in the interior

But the bigger challenge that the right-leaning candidate faces is winning the support of centrist members of the party, said pollster Greg Lyle, who managed the B.C. Liberals' 1996 election campaign. Who is on stage with Mr. Falcon at the Surrey press conference will test whether he can garner centrist backers, Mr. Lyle said. "Does he have a big L Liberal?"

Mr. Falcon will also need to sooth concerns that he would bring an overly confrontational style to the premier's office, Mr. Lyle said. A relatively staid stint as health minister - after initial concerns that he would aggressively pursue privatization - gives him a running start.

Conversely, Mr. Abbott, the former education minister known for his conciliatory approach, needs to demonstrate to the party that he is tough enough to be premier, Mr. Lyle said.

Mr. Falcon's entry means there will be at least two major contenders for the leadership, as he joins Mr. Abbott in the race. Mr. Falcon's bid comes just a few days ahead of an expected announcement by former Liberal minister Christy Clark, now on a week-long sabbatical from her CKNW talk show as she contemplates a leadership bid.

Ms. Clark said at the end of her CKNW show Friday that she's been asked repeatedly whether she'll run to replace Gordon Campbell. "The best answer I can give you right now is I am going to think very hard about it," she said, adding she will make an announcement over the next couple of weeks.

Her entry would add sizzle to the race, Mr. Lyle said. "In this field, Christy Clark would be the celebrity candidate," he said, while questioning whether the blunt style that has served her well on talk radio would work as well in assembling a winning coalition within the Liberal party.

However, the surprise departure of Mr. Campbell, who announced his intention to resign less than halfway through his third term, limits Ms. Clark's ability to build up a network of support, he noted. Ms. Clark spent eight years as a

provincial politician, serving as deputy premier, and holding the portfolios of education and later children and families minister. She quit provincial politics in 2004, narrowly losing the Non-Partisan Association nomination for Vancouver's mayoral race in 2005.

Rookie MLA Moira Stilwell, who has been economic and skills-development minister, was first into the Liberal leadership contest, which culminates in a Feb. 26 vote. She has proposed raising B.C.'s minimum wage to \$10 over two years, ending a nine-year freeze under Mr. Campbell. (The minimum wage, now the lowest in Canada, was last increased in 2001, in the early days of Mr. Campbell's first term.)

Mr. Abbott has said he supports raising the minimum wage, but will implement whatever a review launched last week determines.

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