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NDP, Liberals wage battle over redrawn B.C. ridings

By GLORIA GALLOWAY AND IAN BAILEY

Liberals and NDP are poised to make gains on the West Coast with six new ridings up for grabs and the 'Time for a Change' mantra hurting Tories

Stephen Harper entered the long election race with well over half of the MPs from British Columbia sitting on his benches. But redrawn ridings and a dip in Tory fortunes since 2011 suggest the rival New Democrats and Liberals are about to make gains on Canada's left coast.

That means British Columbians are seeing pitched political battles being waged across the province as Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau and NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair both try to unseat Conservative incumbents and stake their claims in the six new seats created through redistribution.

Greg Lyle of the Innovative Research Group said his polling suggests the Liberals, who had just two seats in B.C. before the writ was dropped, are poised to make gains, especially in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland where the Conservatives are down 11 percentage points from the past election. "The Tories haven't been able to fight the 'Time for a Change' [mantra]," said Mr. Lyle.

And it appears even worse for Mr. Harper in the rest of the province, where his party is down 20 percentage points and his candidates are mainly fending off New Democrats who, the polls suggest, are losing ground east of the Rockies but remain strong in British Columbia.

Mr. Mulcair will head to Vancouver this week to rally his troops for the final stretch.

"The number-one issue on the doorsteps of British Columbia is defeating Stephen Harper, and the only party that can defeat Conservatives in British Columbia is the NDP," said Brad Lavigne, the party's senior adviser.

"We have the largest and best organized ground game in our party's history in the province of British Columbia to gain the support and to ensure that those supporters show up in the advance polls as well as on Oct. 19," said Mr. Lavigne.

The New Democrats say they can win all but one seat on Vancouver Island. They see ridings in the Interior, such as Kootenay-Columbia and Kamloops-Thompson-Cariboo, switching from blue to orange. And, if the stars align for them, they will also make gains in the Lower Mainland.

The Conservatives are sending former public safety minister Stockwell Day and outgoing Industry Minister James Moore around the province to make the case for the re-election of the Conservative government.

But New Democrats are also dispatching high-profile politicians to trumpet the cause. Nathan Cullen, the popular MP from Skeena-Bulkley Valley, has been drumming up support in Vancouver-Granville and Cariboo-Prince George. Libby Davies, the veteran New Democrat who is not running again in Vancouver East, is doing town halls.

A week ago Saturday, the NDP blitzed all British Columbia ridings to count how many voters are committed to casting a ballot in its favour. The party says it gathered the most positive results it has ever seen in the province. And it has a well-equipped political apparatus in the provincial arm of the party.

The New Democrats say they have the right mix of policies to woo B.C. voters, touting a climate-change plan that has been endorsed by major environmental groups and Mr. Mulcair's opposition to the Harper government's anti-terror legislation, which was supported by Mr. Trudeau. British Columbians are being reminded about that in radio ads.

But the Liberals also say they have a slate of policies that will appeal to the people of B.C. They are calling, for instance, for a moratorium on tanker traffic on the province's north coast. And Mr. Trudeau's support for the legalization of marijuana is expected to be better received in Vancouver than anywhere else in the country.

One Liberal ad has emphasized that Mr. Trudeau, who has received an endorsement from Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, considers British Columbia to be a second home – his late grandfather, James Sinclair, lived in the province and Mr. Trudeau has resided and taught in B.C.

All of which is putting pressure on the Conservatives to step up their game.

"We take no vote for granted," said Mr. Day. "We tell people, and we're quite honest about this, that this race is very competitive and every vote is going to count, and British Columbians are going to decide the outcome."

Mr. Lyle said the Conservatives need to find the same mid-campaign comeback that returned the Liberals to office provincially in B.C. after a long period of struggling in the polls.

"What the Tories need to do is they need to get people afraid of what would happen if there's a minority government with the Liberals or NDP at the helm," he said. "They are going to have to find things that would scare people about Justin Trudeau and the NDP."

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