

NDP's new leader could defeat Tories in 2015: poll

BY PETER O'NEIL, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 23, 2012 3:23 PM

The New Democratic Party's new leader to be chosen Saturday has a chance to defeat the Conservatives in 2015 by rallying the party around key economic, environmental, social and foreign policy issues, according to a new poll released Friday.

The poll by Innovative Research Group Inc., done exclusively for The Vancouver Sun, the Edmonton Journal and the Calgary Herald, suggested there are a sufficient number of Canadians – including former Liberal supporters – who could be drawn to policies that would increase taxes on corporations and rich individuals, while taking a hard line on the oilsands industry.

“The NDP candidates are talking about ideas that have the potential to engage more than enough Canadians to form government,” said Innovative Research managing director Greg Lyle, who has worked primarily for small-c conservative parties.

And one of the issues that would unite “progressive” Canadians inside and outside Quebec would be an aggressive policy to tackle environmental damage caused by the oilsands industry by putting a tax on carbon, he said.

But the NDP faces some vulnerabilities, including gun control, its support for unions, and its policies designed to appeal to Quebec nationalists, Lyle said in his analysis.

The Quebec issue is the best weapon “the other parties have to hammer the NDP.”

The next leader also has to avoid old NDP jargon about “brothers and sisters” and theories about redistributing wealth that alienate non-party followers.

“It's like the old joke, ‘how do you tell a New Democrat?’” Lyle said.

“It's someone who looks at something that works in practice and says, yeah, but will it work in theory?’ They have to avoid that stereotype.”

The online survey of 1,193 Canadians was done Tuesday and Wednesday and is considered accurate to within 2.84 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, according to the pollster.

Lyle floated the various ideas being proposed by the seven candidates, and dissected the responses to establish sub-groups of people more or less inclined to support NDP policies.

“Economic issues are a home run for the NDP,” Lyle wrote. “Almost seven in 10 Canadians want the government to take action to close the gap between rich and poor.

“Two thirds (66 per cent) want government to raise taxes on the rich and big business. Again, seven in 10 support the idea (the government should) discourage the export of raw resources and doing

more value added here in Canada.”

But the survey found cool support for unions, and proposals to bring back the gun registry divide some NDP supporters.

On national unity, just one third (32 per cent) agreed with the statement that “there are a lot of issues where it makes sense to do things one way in Quebec and another in the rest of Canada.”

The NDP strongly supports so-called “asymmetrical federalism” that would allow Quebec to opt out of national social programs, and backs Quebec’s right to separate from Canada with only a bare majority in a referendum.

Lyle said the NDP will struggle to avoid getting pummeled by both the Conservatives and the Liberals on the national unity issue.

Among the other findings:

*Among decided voters 37 per cent said they’d vote Conservative if an election were held this week. The NDP were next at 25 per cent, the Liberals third at 24 per cent, and the Bloc Quebecois and Green Party were tied at seven per cent each.

*The poll found tepid interest in the NDP race among Canadians, with only 30 per cent of respondents saying they are following the race.

*Most Canadians (64 per cent) believe any leader who wants to be taken seriously as a potential prime minister should be “comfortably” bilingual.

*Asked where respondents would side on questions pitting the environment against the economy, 44 per cent said the environment, 46 per cent said the economy, and 10 per cent didn’t know.

But a higher percentage of Canadians unsympathetic to the Conservatives sided with environmental issues, suggesting this could be a rallying cry among the centre-left.

*While the NDP “base” of support was only 22 per cent of respondents, a relatively small 15 per cent were hostile to the New Democrats. More than double that number (36 per cent) said they would never vote Tory.

*One in five (21 per cent) said they were willing to support the NDP when Jack Layton was leader, but aren’t now that he’s gone.

*Thomas Mulcair had by far the highest name recognition, with only 32 per cent saying they didn’t recognize his name. More than 40 per cent of respondents hadn’t heard of Brian Topp, Peggy Nash and Paul Dewar, while close to 60 per cent didn’t recognize the names of Martin Singh, Nathan Cullen and Niki Ashton.

*Canadians were divided on whether the NDP should join with the Liberals and Greens to defeat

Harper, with 40 per cent in favour and 38 per cent opposed.

But among NDP supporters there was strong backing for cooperation, with more than two-thirds of party supporters liking the cooperation ideas.

Asked specifically about Cullen's proposal, only 31 per cent of Canadians "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed with the idea compared to 43 per cent were opposed.

But 44 per cent of "firm" NDPers and 45 per cent of "soft" New Democrats liked the idea, while 33 per cent of firm NDPers and 23 per cent of "soft" supporters were opposed.

*A slight majority (52 per cent) of all respondents agreed that Canada should focus more on aid and diplomacy than military actions, while 60 per cent said troops shouldn't be sent abroad without a United Nations mandate.

*A massive 81 per cent overall said the oil and gas industry should not get tax breaks and incentives, though a sub-set of respondents who were deemed "hostile" to the NDP swung the other way – 28 per cent agreed with that proposition, while 52 per cent disagreed.

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