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The Hill Times, September 29th, 2008

Tories targeting 40 key unheld ridings in Quebec, Ontario

Conservatives trying to 'break the back' of Bloc in Quebec, incumbency worth about 10 per cent.

By Simon Doyle, Abbas Rana and Bea Vongdouanchanh

The Conservatives are blitzing at least 40 key swing ridings they don't currently hold in Quebec and Ontario with a barrage of phone calls, door-knocking and direct mailings in an aggressive effort to win at least 20 to 30 more ridings in the provinces on election day and win a majority.

In Quebec, the Tories are going head-to-head with the Bloc Qu  b  cois, targeting ridings currently held by the Bloc but those in which the Conservatives finished second in the 2006 election.

Pierre Martin, a political science professor at the Universit   de Montr  al, told *The Hill Times* last week that the Tories' central objective in Quebec is to "break the back" of the Bloc, and that in some cases they may be helping out the Liberals to ensure a Bloc defeat in the province. Ultimately, the Tories are pursuing Brian Mulroney's strategy of building solid pillars of support in Quebec and the West, and the Conservatives want to emerge from the 2008 election as the party with the most seats in *la belle province*.

"They may think they can break the Bloc's back, even if that means electing a few more Liberals. They're certainly confident," Prof. Martin said. He said the strategy would explain why the Tories are targeting Jeanne-Le Ber, a Bloc-held riding that is seen as a two-way race between the Bloc and the Liberals (the Tories finished with just 11 per cent support in Jeanne-Le-Ber in the 2006 election). Prof. Martin said it would make sense for the Tories to target the riding with anti-Bloc messages. "It's just to attack the Bloc, to break its back," he said.

On the campaign trail in Quebec, Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) has so far visited St. Eustache, in the riding of Riviere-des-Mille-Iles; Chicoutimi, in Chicoutimi-Le Fjord; Farnham, in Brome-Missisquoi;   le Perrot, in Vaudreuil-Soulanges; Drummondville, in Drummond; and Trois-Rivi  res, in the riding of Trois-Rivi  res.

But the leader is not just stopping in targeted ridings, as one Quebec Conservative told *The Hill Times* last week, on a not-for-attribution basis. Leaders will sometimes visit ridings because they are media centres. "Drummond is a good riding for us, but there's also a couple of radio stations there, a couple of local papers," the source said.

Tom Flanagan, Prime Minister Harper's former campaign director, who worked on the Tories' 2006 campaign, said the Conservatives targeted about 67 ridings nationally in both the 2004 and 2006 elections, and the decision to target a riding is not made lightly: it tends to cost between \$40,000 to \$60,000 per riding for phoning and direct mailing costs.

"Targeting a riding is very expensive, so you don't make the decision lightly. It's a commitment to put a lot of money into direct voter contact," he said. "You really have to think that you have a chance to win one or you're afraid of losing one."

Prof. Flanagan, a professor of political science at the University of Calgary, said that when

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a riding is targeted, the central party helps "the riding in various ways. You give advice on the production of literature, the management of volunteers, where to send them for door-knocking, all kinds of advisory help. But the main thing is direct voter contact help, and that's what's expensive."

The Tories' direct-voter-contact program is primarily conducted by Responsive Marketing Group in Toronto. Supporters and swing voters are contacted by direct mail, phone, in person, and email to hear about policy concerns and firm up support. Door-knocking information is also fed into an extensive database on voter support, and some ridings will establish additional phone centres locally.

Prof. Flanagan said a number of factors may determine whether a riding is targeted, such as the strength of the candidates, whether an incumbent is running, and the margin of victory in the last election. Generally, he said, there will be ridings in which the Tories came close to winning in 2006, but which they lost by around 10 per cent or less.

Prof. Flanagan, who is not working on the 2008 campaign, said his research suggests that incumbency is worth about 10 per cent of the vote share, for instance, and agreed that the Tories would be targeting somewhere around 16 ridings or more in Quebec. "There's going to be targeted ridings everywhere but Alberta, I would imagine."

The Conservative source pointed to a number of other ridings in Quebec that the Tories could win, including Repentigny, Saint-Hyacinthe-Bagot, Saint-Jean, Drummond, Montmagny-L'Islet-Kamouraska-Rivière-du-Loup, Saint-Maurice-Champlain and Trois-Rivières. The riding of Saint-Jean, south of Montreal, is seen as important because in most elections it is a bellwether riding for the province, the source said. The source added that if the trend continues to show a Tory rise and Bloc drop in the province, as many as 20 seats could "flip" on election day.

Three weeks into the campaign, however, public opinion polls do not show much movement in Quebec. Although the Tories increased their support in Quebec at the outset of the campaign, the Bloc Québécois last week remained well ahead of the Tories, with opinion polls saying they had between 30 to 40 per cent support and the Tories around 23 or 24 per cent, and the Liberals in the 15 to 20 per cent range (a Harris-Decima poll, for instance, put the Bloc at 39 per cent). The NDP is polling around 12 to 15 per cent in Quebec. Democraticspace.com is currently predicting 48 seats for the Bloc in Quebec and 11 for the Tories, the same number of seats won in the last election.

Ontario is another crucial province, where a substantial number of ridings are feeling Tory resources. Considering the poor polling numbers of the federal Liberals across the country, the Greater Toronto Area is of critical importance as it is one of the few remaining urban areas where the party still hopes to win seats, Greg Lyle, managing director of the polling firm Innovative Research Group in Toronto, said in an interview.

"The Liberals are in big trouble across the country and the GTA is one of the few remaining strongholds for them. So, it's absolutely critical for them to do well in those seats. For the Tories, the GTA is one of two places where they can pick up enough seats to win a majority. For both the parties it matters a lot. For the Liberals it matters for survival, for the Tories, it matters for a majority government," said Mr. Lyle.

He said that to save the seats they currently hold, the Liberals could fall back on old tactics of scaring people about the Conservative Party leader. "The Liberals need voters to get scared about Stephen Harper again. They need people to fear a Tory majority government. Ideally, it would be nice for people to like their leader too, but it's sort of past that now. They need to do to the Tories in the GTA what the Bloc has done to the Tories in Quebec, which is raise their negatives. In actual fact, what's happened is that Dion's negatives have been raised in this campaign so far."

Democraticspace.com is currently predicting the Tories will win extra seats in Ontario. In the 2006 election, the Liberals won 54 seats in Ontario, the Tories 40, and the NDP 12. Democraticspace.com now says the Tories will surpass the Liberals, winning 49 seats in the province. The site predicts the Liberals will win 43 seats and the NDP 14.

To win a majority government, the Tories need to win more seats in the GTA, and need to continue highlighting their strong point, the leadership of the Prime Minister over Mr. Dion in tough economic times, Mr. Lyle said.

"What the Tories need to do is keep the focus on what leader has what it takes to lead this country in this difficult time. The Tories were extremely fortunate with the market's misfortunes last week. Screaming newspaper headlines about the stock market crash really drove up the need to have a strong leader who understands the economy and having a tough economist is perfect as opposed to a cuddly political scientist," said Mr. Lyle.

Meanwhile, Liberal insiders conceded that if the Liberals drop further in public opinion



polls, they could lose some close ridings that they currently hold in the GTA.

Sources specifically identified the ridings of Mississauga South, Oakville, Halton and Newmarket-Aurora. Sources said that the first two ridings are vulnerable because Liberals Paul Szabo and Bonnie Brown won the last federal election by narrow margins of 4.1 and 1.2 per cent of the vote, respectively. Halton is vulnerable, sources said, because Tories won that riding, but later on Garth Turner joined the Liberal caucus. They say the Newmarket-Aurora riding is at risk because incumbent Belinda Stronach is not running in the next election and the Liberal Party's polling numbers are down nationally.

"It's tough this time. If we slipped further [in public opinion polls], we could lose some of the close seats. We need to put in a lot of effort," said one Ontario Liberal MP.

Southern Ontario seats could also make a difference in this election. Tim Woolstencroft, managing partner of polling firm the Strategic Counsel, told *The Hill Times* last week that the Conservatives have "a very strong chance" of winning seats in the 519-area code of southwestern Ontario, which could determine the size of a majority government should Prime Minister Harper win more rural seats in Quebec.

"There's no question that Conservatives are making significant inroads into urban Ontario, which they were basically shut out of in the last election, but they're clearly going to win ridings here," he said.

Mr. Woolstencroft said that Kitchener Centre, Kitchener Conestoga, Huron Bruce, Brant and Guelph are vulnerable swing ridings that could go to the Conservatives.

"We've been saying for some time that a lot of this is Harper being in government. There's no strong animosity, they're holding their vote. The Liberal vote is very soft, and clearly leadership is having a huge impact," he said of the Conservative gains in the ridings. "We also think that the platform for the Liberals announced on Monday is hurting the Liberals. It's a tax and spend platform and that's pushed some Liberals over to the Conservatives. We also think that their crime announcement worked this week and that's helping the Conservatives."

Greg Morrow, a former faculty member at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who specializes in politics and urban space and runs the *Democraticspace.com* website, said that the three urban London-area seats, two of which are now held by Liberals and one by the NDP, will be up for grabs as well.

"London West is probably the most likely to go Conservative because Sue Barnes, the incumbent Liberal, she only won that riding by two points last time," he said. "Two points is something on the order of 1,200, or 1,300 votes, not a great margin. So you could well imagine that one going Conservative."

Mr. Morrow also said that London Fanshawe could be a three-way race, as all parties were within five points of each other in the last election.

"It's going to be even more interesting this time," he said. Mr. Morrow also said that London North Centre is vulnerable because although incumbent Liberal Glen Pearson is "well liked," he is being pulled into the "downward spiral" of the national Liberal Party's campaign.

In the 2006 election, Northern Ontario was also a tight race, but the Conservatives do not have much of a chance of winning any seats there, both Mr. Woolstencroft and Mr. Morrow said. "The Liberal vote has declined significantly, and in Thunder Bay, the NDP are well positioned to pick up. In Thunder Bay Superior North, the NDP lost by one per cent. In Thunder Bay Rainy River, they lost by less than two per cent," Mr. Woolstencroft said. "[The Conservatives] are too far back. They're going to be close, it's going to be a three way race, but right now if we just look at it, it's probably going NDP."

Mr. Morrow said that while the Conservatives have a base in Northern Ontario, it won't be enough to win seats. "If you look at the general trends in Ontario, you've got a Liberal party that has lost about seven points since the last election, and the NDP is hovering at about the same level, but down by two points. The beneficiaries are the Greens, who picked up six points, and the Conservatives picked up three points," he said. "The Liberals were going down faster than the NDP is in Ontario, so in Northern Ontario, where last time the Liberals barely beat the NDP, in many of those seats, you're going to see a very competitive race."

Mr. Woolstencroft also noted that the "fracturing of the left-of-centre vote" will play into Prime Minister's Harper's success in southwestern Ontario. "They are definitely picking up a significant amount of seats in addition to what they have now," he said.

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