



Thursday » September
18 » 2008

10 Races to Care About

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As federal candidates line up for the Oct. 14 vote, the battle for British Columbia could be decided in the Lower Mainland.

The Sun's Doug Ward, who has covered six federal elections for the newspaper, takes a close look at some key ridings in the region where there are going to be tight races when we go to the polls.

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A dozen or so battleground ridings in Metro Vancouver could determine whether Stephen Harper's Conservatives form a majority government.

The Tories need to make significant gains in Canada's big cities, including Metro, to reach a majority, said Denis Pilon, a political scientist at the University of Victoria.

Most B.C. ridings outside of Metro and southern Vancouver Island are reliably Tory-blue. The competitive ridings, on which the election hinges, are mostly urban multicultural seats with three-way fights too close to call.

Current polling shows that the Conservatives and NDP are faring well in B.C., with the Liberals struggling to retain previous support.

"At the moment, the Tories are poised to gain in Metro Vancouver, and they are poised to gain at the expense of the Liberals," said Greg Lyle, a pollster with Innovative Research Group Inc.

The Conservatives are optimistic they can regain middle- to upper-income ridings they've held previously, such as West Vancouver-Sunshine Coast-Sea to Sky Country, North Vancouver and Richmond.

The success of the Tories in bluer-collar ridings could turn on the party's ability to appeal to ethnic Chinese and south Asian voters. The Conservatives, formerly mocked as the party of "angry white men," have a slew of visible-minority candidates in Lower Mainland ridings.

New Democratic Party strategist Gerry Scott said recent polls indicate his party is very competitive in B.C.'s key ridings, with the Liberals on a downward trend. Scott said the NDP could take Vancouver-Kingsway, Vancouver Centre and Newton-North Delta from the Liberals -- and Fleetwood-Port Kells and Pitt Meadows-Maple Ridge-Mission from the Tories.

Ten ridings in B.C. were won in the 2006 election by margins of less than 5.7 per cent of votes. Even formerly safe Liberal seats are becoming increasingly competitive. And there were two factors in the Quadra byelection that should worry Liberals in many Metro Vancouver ridings -- Tory popularity in polls with a high number of Chinese-Canadians and an apparent shift by former Liberal voters to the

Green party.

Liberal spokesman Brad Zubyk said recent polls show that support for the Conservatives has peaked and the Liberals are starting to rise.

"I'm quite confident we are going to gain a handful of seats," said Zubyk.

The narrow vote splits here mean that Canadians for once might be forced to wait until the B.C. results are compiled to know the nature of the next government.

"We might be watching on election night to see if one or more swing ridings in B.C. will push the Conservatives over the top," said Ipsos-Reid pollster Kyle Braid.

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1

WEST VANCOUVER-SUNSHINE COAST- SEA TO SKY COUNTRY

The Conservatives are optimistic about regaining this seat, which they held through the 1980s and '90s, and for good reason. Incumbent Blair Wilson, under the Liberal banner, defeated Conservative candidate John Weston by just under 1,000 votes in 2006. But Wilson was turfed by the Liberals for not informing the party during the nomination-vetting process about his financial and legal difficulties -- problems that were reported extensively in the Vancouver media. Wilson recently joined the Green party and is running as its candidate. The Liberals have a strong candidate in Squamish mayor Ian Sutherland, but he'll be hard-pressed to beat Tory Weston, a lawyer, in West Vancouver, given Liberal leader Stephane Dion's poor personal-approval ratings. The NDP is likely to finish far back. Its sacrifice candidate is marijuana activist Dana Larsen.

2

FLEETWOOD-PORT KELLS

This could be one of the tightest battles in B.C. Incumbent Conservative MP Nina Grewal won by only 800 votes over Liberal Brenda Locke in 2006 -- and the two women are both back as candidates. Grewal has performed well in this northeast Surrey riding despite Locke's high profile as a former provincial cabinet minister and the controversies that forced Grewal's husband, former MP Gurman Grewal, to quit politics. The NDP finished a close third last time and could be competitive again with candidate Nao Fernando, an employment-relations officer. Grewal might lose some previous support because of the anger among some Sikhs that Prime Minister Stephen Harper chose to apologize at a Surrey park for the Komagata Maru incident rather than in Parliament. About 376 mostly Sikh passengers on the Japanese ship were blocked from entering Vancouver in 1914.

3

NEWTON-NORTH DELTA

This is another true three-way race, with incumbent Liberal Sukh Dhaliwal under threat from Conservative candidate Sandeep Pandher and New Democrat Teresa Townsley. The 2006 vote was a cliff-hanger with fewer than 2,000 votes separating candidates from the three main parties. The NDP finished second last time and has high hopes for Townsley, a nurse who is vice-chairwoman of the Delta board of education. The Tories hope that having a Sikh candidate this time will cut into Dhaliwal's support in the riding's Indo-Canadian community. Dhaliwal's campaign got

off to a rough start this week when The Vancouver Sun revealed that he had written a letter to an American judge on House of Commons stationery in support of Ranjit Cheema, a convicted international drug trafficker.

4

BURNABY-DOUGLAS

Will this be third time lucky for Liberal Bill Cunningham in his quixotic quest to topple NDP incumbent Bill Siksay? It won't be easy for the long-time federal Liberal backroom operative. The NDP has a strong support base here, one that kept electing former MP Svend Robinson. The Conservatives have finished a close third in recent elections and might do better this time with Conservative candidate Ronald Leung, a well-known radio commentator. Leung's social conservatism could win him votes in the riding's growing Asian community -- possibly undercutting Liberal Cunningham -- but he has little profile outside of it. The New Democrats, who dominate civic politics in Burnaby, have a strong get-out-the-vote machine to help Siksay, who already enjoys strong name recognition after three election campaigns.

5

RICHMOND

Veteran Liberal MP Raymond Chan's victories over Conservative candidates here have rarely come easy, and this election should be no exception. Chan is up against a fellow Hong Kong immigrant -- Tory candidate Alice Wong, a businesswoman whom he narrowly defeated in 2004. Chan beat Wong, a social conservative, by about 4,000 votes in that election. He won by only about 2,000 votes in 2006 over Darrel Reid, another social conservative. In both elections, Chan attempted to portray his Tory opponents as religious extremists. It's uncertain whether that tactic can succeed again with the Conservative party focusing on economic and criminal justice issues and rarely mentioning social values. Conservative leader Harper probably won some support in the riding's huge Chinese-Canadian community with his party's apology for the Chinese head tax.

6

NORTH VANCOUVER

Liberal MP Don Bell started off the campaign by suffering a minor heart attack and becoming the first patient to use Lions Gate Hospital's new emergency facilities. Doctors determined that Bell was not in immediate danger, but it was not a good omen for the incumbent given the tough challenge he faces from Conservative candidate Andrew Saxton in this two-way race. Bell, a long-time popular mayor in North Vancouver, beat his Tory challenger by more than 3,000 votes last time. He will need his strong name recognition to defeat Saxton, an investment firm CEO whose father built the Grouse Mountain Skyride. The Tories believe they can recapture this riding if Harper continues to top Dion on the leadership question.

7

SURREY NORTH

This is one of the strangest races anywhere with Conservative Donna Cadman, widow of former MP Chuck Cadman, running to succeed her personal friend, retiring NDP MP Penny Priddy. Donna Cadman clashed earlier this year with her own party over allegations the Harper Conservatives had made a financial offer to her dying husband to sway a critical vote in Parliament. Donna Cadman said the offer had been made,

but the Tories denied it. The working-class riding has gone back and forth between the NDP and the Conservatives. Priddy, previously a longtime provincial MLA in Surrey, had a strong personal following. It's unclear whether a lower-profile New Democrat can beat Donna Cadman, who can rely on the memory of her populist husband to give her an edge.

8

VANCOUVER-QUADRA

This upscale riding on the city's west side was once regarded as a safe Liberal seat, but no more. Former Liberal MP Stephen Owen won in 2006 by more than 10,000 votes. Liberal candidate Joyce Murray finished ahead of Tory challenger Deborah Meredith by 151 votes in a byelection in March. The Liberals are hoping that, as the incumbent MP, Murray will capture a much greater share of the vote in a general election where the turnout will be much higher. Tory Meredith is running again and hoping there are far more Conservatives out there than the ones she snagged in the byelection. The Tories believe that Prime Minister Harper's high personal approval ratings over Liberal leader Stephane Dion will help Meredith woo the professional and business elite that lives in this riding.

9

Vancouver Centre

Liberal incumbent Hedy Fry has no shortage of detractors, but she's always sent back to Ottawa by voters in this diverse downtown riding. There are a number of reasons to believe the veteran MP might be forced to stay in Vancouver this time. The NDP has a strong candidate in Michael Byers, a University of B.C. professor, author and rising public intellectual. The Conservatives have a high-profile candidate in Lorne Mayencourt, who has represented the provincial riding of Vancouver-Burrard since 2001 and is a member of the area's large gay community. Even the Green party has a reasonably well-known candidate -- Adrienne Carr, former provincial Green party leader. Many soft Liberal supporters might switch to the Greens. Despite these challenges, flamboyant Fry remains the favourite.

10

VANCOUVER-KINGSWAY

The ghost of David Emerson will hang over the battle for this east-side riding, which has bounced between the Liberals and New Democrats for decades. The Liberals, who won the seat with Emerson in 2006 and then lost it when he bolted to the Tories, have a strong appetite for revenge here. Their candidate is Wendy Yuan, an immigrant from China and head of an export company that does business in Asia. The NDP believes it has a good chance to reclaim the seat with candidate Don Davies, an in-house lawyer for Teamsters Canada and a local community activist. The Conservative candidate is Solomon Rayek, who has tried to build connections between the party and the Jewish community.

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