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Clark exudes confidence as vote nears

By JUSTINE HUNTER
From Friday's Globe and Mail

Weighted voting system makes precise tracking of delegates' intentions a mug's game

Christy Clark is oozing confidence this week going into Saturday's vote for the next leader of the BC Liberals. She says her tracking of the party's 90,000 members puts her "north of 40 per cent" and well ahead of her three rivals.

If her numbers hold up, Ms. Clark goes into Saturday with a reason to swagger. At 43 per cent, she'd need to capture roughly one in three of the second-choice preferences from the bottom two candidates to secure a victory - a realistic target.

But the way the BC Liberals are counting those ballots would give bookies a headache. With their single-shot, preferential ballot, counted according to a weighted voting system, the conventional rules for predicting (or manipulating) leadership conventions must be tossed out the window.

"There is no game theory here," pollster and strategist Greg Lyle said.

The most exciting political upsets are produced when there is a chance for delegates to react between ballots. When there are multiple ballots, momentum can build against the front-runner - Joe Clark, Ed Stelmach and Stéphane Dion all won their leadership after showing poorly on the first ballot.

The BC Liberals must lock in their preferences - no less than two - before the votes are counted.

And their weighted voting system - there are 100 points for each of the province's 85 ridings, no matter how many Liberals in each constituency - makes tracking voter intentions with any degree of precision a mug's game. How much is a second-choice ballot in Vancouver-Kingsway worth?

Here's how the campaigns are adapting to the new rules:

Christy Clark

On Saturday, her team of about 200 volunteers will be tasked with cajoling their 30,000 identified supporters to cast their ballots. For each of the camps, turnout is everything - the party will be doing well if it has 55,000 valid ballots to count on Saturday.

For Ms. Clark, asserting her dominant position in the pack is essential heading into voting day. That's why she was free with her internal polling figures. She has cast herself as the candidate who has the best chance of winning the next provincial election because of her broad public appeal.

Is there a strategy for her supporters' second choice? "We're only making sure they put down a second choice," a Clark strategist explained. "Lots of people are asking us 'what should we do?' We have to explain it doesn't affect Christy at all." Because she's expected to be on the ballot to the end, those second preferences won't be counted.

Kevin Falcon

Mr. Falcon has enlisted the support of nearly half of the BC Liberal caucus, and those MLAs have been told their pretty face isn't enough - to earn his favour they must deliver at least half of the votes in their respective ridings. Beyond that, there is a huge phone tree at work.

"I have a group of 50 people I am responsible for," one worker explained. His job on Saturday is not just to make sure his flock makes it to a telephone or a computer terminal to vote, but that they fill in the ballot in a certain order.

"Your first choice is Kevin," he'll explain. "And then we have a discussion about second choice." Is that Mike de Jong, who is expected to be the first to drop off? Or George Abbott, his other chief rival? "The real game is staying ahead of George and continuing to grow."

George Abbott

Mr. Abbott has generously stated that Mr. Falcon will be his second choice on the ballot. It's a you-scratch-my-back gesture that is meant to persuade Falcon supporters to name Mr. Abbott as their second choice. Second place on the first ballot will be one of those two, the theory goes, so the mutual exchange of second choices is the best chance that either of them has to defeat Ms. Clark.

But there hasn't been a clear direction from either camp - and that increases the odds that if the vote goes to a second or third ballot, the deciding second-choice ballots will bleed in all directions.

Mr. Abbott's camp insists it will go down to a third ballot and that's where Ms. Clark will choke. "There is an anybody-but-Christy sentiment there," a campaign insider predicted. "She's obviously doing well on first, but she's not doing well on second choice at all."

Mike de Jong

Mr. de Jong says he's been courted by all three candidates, hoping he would bail out early and throw his support to one of them. But he's insisted he isn't interested in playing king (or queen) maker. His campaign reports it has signed up more than 10,000 party members, and hopes to make inroads with the 35,000 Liberals who were members before the leadership race began.

Still, he is expected to be the first to drop off the ballot, and that means his supporters' second-choice preferences could be the most critical to deciding the outcome. Yet Mr. de Jong has offered his supporters no direction on how to rank the other candidates.

"People get pissed off if you do try to tell them how to mark their second choice," a de Jong organizer said. "What they do with their second choice, you can't predict."

If there is any surprise on Saturday, it will start with Mr. de Jong's unpredictable fans.

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