

Immigration bill could be tough to sell

Massive Backlog; Issue has potential to trigger election

Andrew Mayeda, Canwest News Service

Published: Monday, April 21, 2008



Chris Wattie, Reuters

OTTAWA -- When Diane Finley took over as federal immigration minister in January 2007, she and her aides quickly identified the massive backlog of permanent-residence applications clogging up Canada's immigration system as the "elephant in the room."

How could Canada get the immigrants it needs, they reasoned, with hundreds of thousands of files sitting on the desks of the country's visa officers? Now, as the political fallout spreads from the government's controversial immigration bill, Conservative strategists are hoping the backlog doesn't turn into an albatross around their necks in the next election.

Last week, the government launched an advertising campaign that promises the proposed changes will create an immigration system that is "flexible, fast and fair for everyone." The print and radio ads, which are being funded by public coffers, will run for the next few weeks in ethnic-media outlets. The ads have cost about \$60,000 so far, but the immigration department could not say what the final tab will be.

Government officials say the campaign is designed to clear up misunderstandings about the bill, which gives the immigration minister more power to fast track the applications of certain types of immigrants. The government says that will help reduce the backlog, which has reached 925,000 applications, while making the immigration system more responsive to labour-market needs.

But opposition critics say the ads are an inappropriate use of taxpayer dollars.

"She knows she's in trouble," New Democrat MP Olivia Chow said of Ms. Finley. Ms. Chow rejects the ad's central premise that the changes will reduce the backlog, because under the proposed law, applications received before Feb. 27, 2008, will not be affected. "It's using taxpayers' money to sell a Conservative line," she said.

Senior Conservatives say they never expected immigration to be an election trigger when the party took power more than two years ago. But that could very well happen. The Conservatives have rolled the immigration bill into the broader budget-implementation bill, which is automatically considered a matter of confidence in the government.

The bill is now before the finance committee, and will likely return to the Commons for a third and final vote in the first or second week of May.

The NDP and the Bloc Quebecois oppose the bill. The Liberals have trashed it as anti-immigrant, but have stopped short of voting it down in the House of Commons.

But Liberal MPs are coming under increasing pressure from some ethnic groups to oppose the bill. Last week, a coalition that includes the Chinese Canadian National Council and the Canadian Arab Federation staged a demonstration at the Toronto constituency office of Liberal MP Bob Rae. The coalition is threatening not to vote Liberal if the party doesn't oppose the bill.

"The challenge for the Conservatives is that this is not traditionally part of their brand equity," said pollster Nik Nanos, president of Nanos Research.

In the past two years, the Conservatives have made a concerted effort to break the Liberals' stranglehold on the ethnic vote. The push has been led by Secretary of State for Multiculturalism Jason Kenney, who spends endless hours attending dinners and social events organized by ethnic groups.

Government officials concede the immigration bill has slowed the momentum of those outreach efforts. And Conservative strategists now expect the immigration bill to remain a key issue in ethnic newspapers and multicultural networks such as OMNI Television throughout the campaign, even if it doesn't gain traction as a national issue.

"We believe that it's going to be vicious trench warfare, and the vast majority of the native-born Canadian population will be completely oblivious to it, because this vicious trench warfare will play itself out at the doorstep and in the ethnic media," said a senior Conservative source, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

It is a good bet the Liberals will try to rekindle suspicions of an anti-immigration agenda within the Conservative caucus if the issue plays prominently in the next election. But Mr. Nanos said an overly aggressive strategy could backfire if the Conservatives can prove they are taking concrete steps to cut the backlog, which ballooned under the previous Liberal government.