canoe network ··· cnews

EDMONTON SUN

March 31, 2008

By NIK NANOS

Poking Ontario, Canada's most populous province, with a sharp stick may not seem like a good way to form a majority government, but let's take a closer look.

The Harper Tories won the last federal election, but lost the popular vote in Ontario. They have former Ontario Conservative cabinet ministers in senior federal portfolios.

The federal tone directed at Ontario initially sounds like frustration with a province where the Harper Conservatives have not been able to move the dial. There have been, what some may call, the usual federal-provincial political tussles.

However, the increasing importance of the economy as an issue, as detailed in the latest Nanos Research-Sun Media poll, and the Harper government's sustained attacks on the McGuinty government could be a strategy driven by political machination, not frustration.

The exchanges between federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty and the provincial government may be ideologically driven, but they have an edge bordering on the personal.

What started off as a series of comments made by Flaherty criticizing the Ontario government for its fiscal policies and failing to provide tax relief escalated to a statement made by Flaherty that Ontario should be "the last place" in Canada to start a business. One might argue that federal-provincial spats are part of our federation. However, the "last place in Canada" comment made by Flaherty goes beyond attacking a provincial government because it can be viewed as swipe against Ontario. It also delivers to the federal Liberals a quote that may come back to haunt the Harper government in Ontario.

Beyond that quote, what the Harper Conservatives may be unfolding is a more subtle narrative, laying the blame of a potential economic downturn at the feet of the Ontario Liberals. If one recalls, when the Canadian dollar hit par and the Ontario economy started to soften, the calls were for the Harper government to act. Now, more of the focus is on the Ontario Liberal government and what it could or should be doing.

In effect, the Harper Conservatives seem to be politically inoculating themselves from the potential negative fallout of an economic downturn. Their unspoken mantra - blame the Government of Ontario, blame McGuinty, blame the Liberals, speaks to a strategy of diversion.

From a Conservative perspective, what could be better to keep on the minds of voters other than the economy and taxes? From a polling perspective, each of the parties have inherent brand strengths. Part of the traditional Conservative brand strength relates to taxes and the economy.

In this particular case, the Harper Conservatives can get voters to focus on taxes and the economy and can blame the Ontario provincial Liberals. The Conservatives are likely better served if the election is about fiscal issues rather than social issues, the environment, healthcare or Afghanistan.

BAD FOR INCUMBENTS

Conventional wisdom states that an economic downturn is bad for incumbent governments. Even with a potential downturn in the economy, the federal Tories can try to play the economic "fear card" -- that things could or would be worse economically under a federal Liberal government.

In that respect, think of the attacks on the McGuinty Liberals as a precursor of future attacks on the Dion Liberals.