

NEWS

NDP MPs to blitz urban ridings, try to seize on Liberal immigration votes

In a key confidence vote in the House last week on a controversial new immigration proposal, the Liberals voted with the government

By **ABBAS RANA**

With the Liberal Party's strategy of criticizing the immigration reforms proposed by the Conservatives but avoiding an election by not voting it down in the House, the NDP is sensing an opportunity to reach out to ethnic minorities and last week started a 30-day all out blitz in which NDP MPs are travelling to major urban centres to meet with representatives of ethnic communities and tell them about the efforts that the New Democrat MPs are undertaking to oppose the Harper Conservatives on the immigration bill.

"Systematically, the Liberals are abandoning the groups that have traditionally supported them to the extent that if this keeps going on, they'll be a rump in Toronto and maybe on the West Island of Montreal. We'll keep chipping away, we'll seize all opportunities and we're more than ready and willing to put together a new coalition under Jack Layton and the NDP's banner," said Brad Lavigne, director of communications and research for the NDP caucus, told *The Hill Times* last week.

Last week, as part of the strategy, some of the NDP MPs, including NDP Leader Jack Layton (Toronto-Danforth, Ont.), deputy leader Tom Mulcair (Outremont, Que.) and NDP immigration critic Olivia Chow (Trinity-Spadina, Ont.),

travelled to Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto to meet with immigrant communities in roundtable or town hall meetings. Other NDP MPs will also travel to different regions of the country to explain to them the implications of the proposed immigration changes and also state what their party's stand is on the issue. Also, the NDP has asked all its nominated candidates across the country to write letters-to-the-editor in their local papers and do local media interviews on proposed immigration changes.

In a Montreal roundtable meeting in which Mr. Mulcair and Ms. Chow participated on Thursday evening, about 68 people from 30 to 40 different ethnic backgrounds showed up to discuss their concerns about the immigration reforms introduced by the Harper Conservatives, an assistant to Ms. Chow told *The Hill Times* on Friday morning.

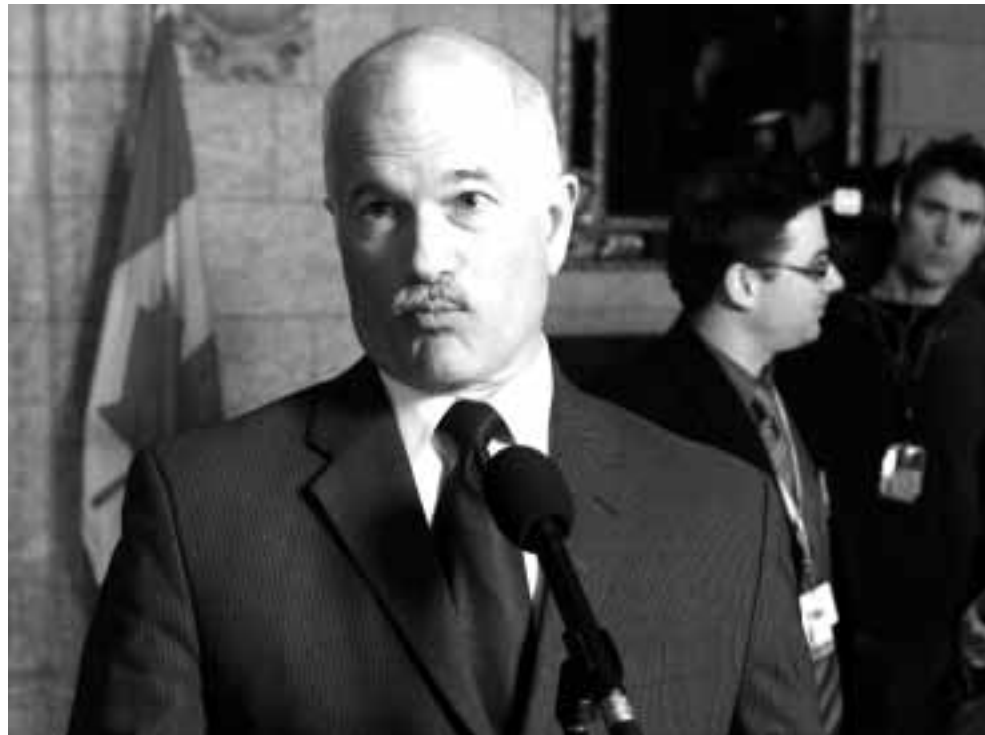
In a key confidence vote in the House last week on an NDP motion aimed to block the Conservative budget implementation bill, which contained the controversial new immigration proposal, Liberals voted with the government. The Bloc supported the NDP on the vote that took place on Wednesday, April 9, and the final tally on the vote was 201 to 68.

Liberals, however, have not ruled out voting against the government on the issue at a later date, arguing that they want to know more

about the legislation. This issue could still trigger a federal election as minorities are a bed rock of the Liberal Party's vote bank and some senior Liberals are worried that failing to take action could disappoint their base. Conservatives have also been aggressively courting the immigrant communities since the last federal election in hopes of winning closely contested seats.

If passed, the reforms to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act would give the Immigration minister discretion to speed up applicants whose skills are in demand in Canada, but the Liberals are saying the measure give the Tories too much discretionary power and replaces "open arms with closed doors." Critics add that the reforms are unlikely to address the backlog issue and will discourage potential applicants to apply. Conservatives argue that the reforms are needed to deal with a backlog of about one million applicants and that they are ready to go to the polls on the issue if the opposition tries to block the legislation.

A Nanos poll that came out on Friday morning showed that nationally the Liberals and the Conservatives are in a virtual dead heat, with 36 per cent support each, while the NDP is down by five percentage points since February and currently has the support of 14 per cent of Canadians. The Green Party,



Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

Down with Liberals: NDP Leader Jack Layton, pictured on Parliament Hill. NDP MPs last week started a 30-day, all-out blitz in which NDP MPs are travelling to major urban centres to meet with representatives of ethnic communities to tell them about the efforts that the NDP MPs are undertaking to oppose the Harper Conservatives on the immigration bill.

according to the poll, has the support of six per cent of Canadians.

In Quebec, the Bloc Québécois is leading the pack with 35 per cent support, followed by the Tories and the Liberals both tied at 23 per cent, NDP with 13 per cent and the Green party has support from six per cent of Quebecers.

In Ontario, the Dion Liberals are ahead of the other parties with 50 per cent support. The Conservatives have support from 32 per cent of Ontarians, the NDP 13 per cent and the Green Party six per cent.

Conservatives and the Liberals told *The Hill Times* in interviews that they're not worried about the NDP's 30-day campaign on immigration.

"It's mostly fear mongering. They're playing politics with this issue and I guess that's what politicians do. They're free to do [whatever they want] but the reforms that we put in place are good for Canada, good

for new Canadians, good for prospective Canadians and the NDP can try to play politics with this, but we think that new Canadians and all Canadians understand that these reforms are certainly in the best interest of Canada," said Conservative MP James Moore (Port Moody-Westwood-Port Coquitlam, B.C.), in an interview last week.

Mr. Moore said that it's highly unlikely that the NDP will be able to make any political gains as a result of the campaign. "I doubt it. New Canadians and new voters in the next election campaign are not easily persuaded by a fear campaign based on false information, so I'm not too worried about it."

Liberal MP Judy Sgro (York West, Ont.), also a former Citizenship and Immigration Minister, in an interview with *The Hill Times* said that being the fourth party in the House, NDP MPs can say or do anything they want as they

have no hope to win the next election. But Liberals, she said, being the Official Opposition, have to be responsible in what they say and what they do in the House. Explaining why the Liberals are not backing up their rhetoric with actions on immigration reforms, she said that her party caucus wants to get more details about the issue and also wants to examine these reforms in detail in the Committee.

"The NDP are a joke. Let's remember who they are: They're not the official opposition. Frankly, if I was the NDP or the Bloc, I'd be doing the same thing. They're always trying to rev up all these hysterical stories and all this stuff. They can be as irresponsible as they want because they are the fourth party in the Parliament. We're the official opposition. We have a responsibility to the Citizens of Canada to conduct ourselves properly."

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Photo by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*.

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