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The Hill Times, August 24th, 2009
NEWS STORY
 By Harris MacLeod

Conservatives made \$2-billion worth of spending announcements

Pollsters say key to success in the next election will be convincing voters of economic management credentials.

The Conservative government has made spending announcements virtually everyday since the House adjourned for the summer on June 22, totalling more than \$2-billion.

Though every region is getting a taste of the federal government's Economic Action Plan, of the 126 announcements made this summer, the province of Quebec has had the highest volume of spending announcements at 20 per cent, which pollster Nik Nanos said could pay off for the Tories in the long run.

"Think of this as a bit of a political investment," Mr. Nanos said.

The Conservatives have made \$2,031,183,013 worth of announcements as of last week, and Quebec received \$179,210,792, or eight per cent of the funding.

Mr. Nanos said the spending announcements—which range from \$490,000 for a Quebec City festival, to a \$115-million project to extend a highway in the Outaouais region—wouldn't improve the government's dismal poll numbers in the province on their own, but if the stars align in other areas it could pay off. Recent polls have pegged Conservative support at around 10 per cent in Quebec, while the Liberals have had something of a resurgence in the province under Leader Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.). But, Mr. Nanos said a lot can happen between now and an election and the government's continuing attention to the province could lay the ground for a comeback.

And while the Liberals, whose support in Quebec collapsed after the sponsorship scandal that contributed to the defeat of former prime minister Paul Martin, in 2006, are doing well, the separatist Bloc Qu  b  cois could end up being the big beneficiary of the Grit revival, said Mr. Nanos.

"The percentage of support that the Liberals have in the province of Quebec, because it's concentrated significantly on the Island of Montreal, doesn't yield a comparable payout in seats. So the Liberals will pick up seats on the Island of Montreal but one of the beneficiaries of the Liberals increasing their support across the province will be the Bloc, who will have a better chance in some ridings because of a split in the [federalist] vote," he said.

An Ekos poll released last week had the two parties virtually deadlocked, with Conservative support nationally at 32.8 per cent, and the Liberals at 30.2 per cent. In Quebec, the Conservatives have 16.3 per cent support and the Liberals hold 27.3 per cent. The Bloc Qu  b  cois still have 38.5 per cent support in Qu  bec.

Mario Canseco, vice president of public affairs at Angus Reid strategies, said the government's rollout of its Economic Action Plan is intended to bolster the Conservatives' image as being good economic managers, which will be the key to success in the next election. He said the fallout from the recession has not been as severe as many expected, and that makes it more difficult for Mr. Ignatieff to gain the edge over Mr. Harper on the economy issue.

"That's the area that is really hard for them at this particular stage because it really hasn't been as dire as some people imagined. It would be fairly simple to run a campaign like the one Jean Ch  rien ran back in 1993, where things are so clearly out



of whack that you don't really need to boost on your own credentials in order to get the voters to like you and to think that you could do a good job," said Mr. Canseco.

The economy will be the number one issue in suburban Ontario, including the GTA, 905, and 519 regions, which has been a battleground in the last few elections and where both parties hope to make gains next time. Mr. Ignatieff's flirtation with a "champion of the people" mantra, including his demands for reforms to the Employment Insurance system, might strike a chord with left-leaning Liberal and NDP voters, but if he wants to win back swing ridings in Ontario then he needs to come across as more pro-business, said Mr. Canseco.

"He needs to talk a little bit more about enterprises and be someone who's not as threatening to business at this point," he said.

Mr. Nanos said a provincial by-election, to be held on Sept. 17 in the suburban Toronto riding of St. Paul's, will be a good measure of the political climate for the next federal election, which could be called as early as the end of September. Two star candidates from the provincial Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties are facing off to win the seat vacated by former Ontario Liberal cabinet minister Michael Bryant, which is held federally by Liberal MP Carolyn Bennett. It's the first electoral test for the government of Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty since it took the controversial step of merging the eight per cent provincial sales tax with the five per cent federal GST. Mr. McGuinty said he did it with the help and encouragement of the federal government, but some federal Conservative MPs in Ontario have been trying to distance themselves and their government from the plan.

"Even though it's a provincial by-election, if the Progressive Conservatives can do well in St. Paul's that will be another signal that, maybe because of how the Conservatives are managing the economy as an issue, they have a shot in a greater number of suburban ridings in the GTA," Mr. Nanos said. "You can't convert the results of the by-election onto the federal scene, but it's just another signal to read in regards to the mood of the electorate. If the provincial Liberals register a massive win in St. Paul's, even though the Progressive Conservatives are fielding a very centrist candidate, it will be a signal to the federal Conservatives that there might not be as many growth opportunities in the GTA suburban ridings as they'd hoped."

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