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The Hill Times, March 2nd, 2009  
**NEWS STORY**  
By Abbas Rana

## Tories and Libs focusing on 'key battleground' of fertile Ontario

**Conservatives say Ontario will be fertile political ground in the next election.**

The Conservatives, who could be defeated in June by the federal Liberals, say Ontario will be fertile political ground in the next election and will pay special attention to all the ridings where they lost by a margin of five per cent or less.

"Ontario is going to be [a] key battleground and we're working very hard not only to keep the seats that we already have but also to win more especially the close ones," a top Conservative told *The Hill Times* recently.

In the Oct. 14 election, there were 13 Ontario ridings where the margin of victory was five per cent or less.

The Liberals and Conservatives won five each and the NDP won three of the 13 ridings. Overall, out of the 106 Ontario ridings, the Tories won 51 seats, the Liberals 38 and the New Democrats 17 seats.

Prior to the last federal election, Quebec was seen as the potential province where Conservative were hoping to make significant gains but the government's initiative before the election to make cultural cuts and youth crime proposals caused anger in the province.

As a result, Conservatives were able to win only 10 seats in the Oct. 14 election, the same number they won in 2006.

After the election, the situation became more precarious when Liberals and the NDP formed a coalition with the support of the Bloc, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) called it a "separatist coalition." This label gained traction in the rest of the country especially in the Western Canadian provinces but Quebecers showed significant resentment.

Recent public opinion polls indicated that the Conservatives are trailing the Bloc and the Liberals with a significant margin in Quebec while Conservatives are running neck and neck with the Liberals nationally.

According to a Nanos Research poll released on Feb. 12, the Conservatives and the Liberals were in a statistical dead heat in popular support with 34 and 33 per cent, respectively. The NDP support was at 16 per cent, followed by the Bloc at 10 per cent, and the Green Party support was at 10 per cent.

In Quebec, the Bloc Qu b cois was still leading the pack with 38 per cent support followed by the Liberal Party at 28 per cent. The Conservatives were at 16 per cent, the NDP at 14 and the Green Party had five per cent of Quebecers.

In the vote-rich province of Ontario, Liberals were leading with 43 per cent support followed by the Conservatives at 34 per cent, NDP at 15 per cent, and the Green Party at nine per cent.

Liberal insiders agreed that the next key battleground is going to be Ontario with a special focus on ridings where the margin of victory in the last federal election was five per cent or less because the Conservatives are unlikely to make any gains in Western or Atlantic Canada.

"The [Conservative] strategy is reflective of the reality of the situation. In Quebec, the fight will be to hang on to the 10 seats that they currently hold. Realistically, there's not a lot of room for gain in Western or Atlantic provinces. The only battleground left is Ontario," said one Liberal insider.



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There are 92 House seats in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. In the last federal election, the Conservatives won 77 of those seats, the Liberals won seven and the NDP won 14. The Conservatives won nine of 14 seats in Manitoba, 13 of 14 in Saskatchewan, 27 of 28 in Alberta and 22 of 36 in B.C. The Liberals won five in B.C., one in Saskatchewan and one in Manitoba. The NDP won four in Manitoba, one in Alberta and nine in B.C.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, there are a total of 32 seats and in the Oct. 14 election, the Conservatives won 10, the Liberals 17, the NDP four and one seat was carried by Independent MP Bill Casey (Cumberland-Colchester-Musquodoboit Valley, N.S.). Mr. Casey has announced that he is not seeking re-election in the next federal election.

Conservative and Liberal sources said that ridings with close margins are usually the ones targeted by the political parties.

"There's always been this theory that local campaigns can make a difference of up to five per cent. If it's a marginal riding and let's say the marginal gap is 10 or 15 per cent, that's harder to cover. But if it's five per cent, that usually means, if you run a strong campaign, locally with a right candidate, that riding becomes more competitive. There's no point in having a strong local campaign and putting more resources when you lose that riding by 30 per cent every time," said a Liberal based in Western Canada.

"The marginal ridings are the ones that determine elections because those are the ones that swing back and forth or are always competitive, whereas, there are other ridings in the country that are generally considered as safe ridings," said the source.

Political parties pay particular attention to these close ridings by recruiting quality candidates, help candidates raise funds, provide campaign literature, arrange advance visits of high profile Cabinet ministers or in the case of opposition parties, prominent MPs and also schedule party leaders' visits both before and during the course of the campaign.

Ontario Conservative MPs, who won in close ridings in the last election, told *The Hill Times* last week said that their strategy to win the next election is to prove themselves to be good constituency MPs.

"When you're a new Member of Parliament, you've got priorities and priorities have to be learning this job and making sure that your absolute priority is taking care of your constituents because if you don't do that, the rest of it just doesn't matter," said Conservative MP Ed Holder (London West, Ont.) who won the last federal election by a margin of 3.7 per cent of the vote and defeated five-term Liberal MP Sue Barnes.

Rookie Conservative MP Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges-Markham, Ont.) said that in addition to serving his constituents well, he also keeps in close contact with the local media in his riding so that constituents are aware about his work as an MP.

"My focus is on the riding. I make sure that my local media knows what's happening, that's my job as a local representative. I leave the national media up to other people. I want to make sure that people have a very good understanding about what we're doing in the riding what I'm doing as a Member of Parliament, what the government is doing, and how we're working with other levels to get things done for the riding," said Mr. Calandra, who won the last election by a margin of .7 per cent of the vote by defeating two-term Liberal MP Lui Temelkovski.

NDP MP Malcolm Allen (Welland, Ont.), who defeated former five-term Liberal MP John Maloney, said that he started his campaign right after the last federal election and is also focusing on helping out his constituents.

"We're always working hard, our folks in the riding are still working hard. Once the results come in and you've won the riding, it doesn't mean to say you should rest on your laurels, no matter how big or small that number is. It's really about continuing to work hard [and help constituents in solving their problems]," said Mr. Allen.

Former Ontario Liberal MP Omar Alghabra, who lost the last federal election to Conservative MP Bob Dechert, told *The Hill Times* that since the October election, he has been planning on preparing for the next election.

Mr. Alghabra said he's been in consultations in the riding to reconfigure his campaign team, assess why he lost the last election and to plan for the next election.

Mr. Alghabra said that the party headquarters has been helping him out in his preparations but declined to give out any details.

"The Liberal Party has certainly been very active in helping our riding from providing guidance to providing resources," said Mr. Alghabra.

When asked if he was confident of winning the riding back, he said: "This is politics, one cannot be presumptuous about anything. All I could say is that in a twisted way, defeat is good for everybody, Bob Dechert himself will say that. He lost twice so I'm benefiting from the experience and I'm looking forward to the next campaign."

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