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Bad run for Dalton's Libs 'won't help' federal Grits

By CHRISTINA SPENCER, NATIONAL BUREAU

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Bulging expense claims at Ontario's ehealth agency. Flagrant financial abuses at the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. A consultant paid \$3,500 a day for a universities report.

And last week, news that a former rising-star provincial cabinet minister had been charged in the death of a cyclist.

It has been a very bad run for Dalton McGuinty's Ontario Liberals.

Now, with a federal election fluttering in the autumn winds, political experts are asking if the clouds of provincial scandal could waft over the federal Liberals as well. How much can the fortunes of a provincial party affect its federal counterpart?

"It's a long-debated question in politics," says Akaash Maharaj, former national policy chair for the federal Liberals.

IMPACT

"Certainly it will not help the federal Liberal party," Maharaj says, but whether it could cause significant damage isn't clear either.

The impact of provincial scandals on the federal Grits "will be virtually nil," predicts University of Toronto political scientist Nelson Wiseman.

That's partly because voters don't remember scandals for long, Wiseman argues.

Barely a year and a half ago, for instance, McGuinty was reeling under revelations of huge salaries and perks at Hydro One.

No one mentions it anymore.

"The public and the media have such a short attention span," Wiseman says.

"Is this going to resonate? No."

Still, it would be better for the federal Liberals if they didn't have to cope with provincial party "turbulence," says former Ontario Liberal cabinet minister Sean Conway. And he adds some scandals do leave a mark.

"eHealth absolutely resonated. It became public at a time when people personally were feeling some real pain and anxiety."

There's little evidence to suggest a direct spillover at the ballot box from one level of government to another, pollster Nik Nanos says.

VOLUNTEERS

But, Nanos stresses, the health of a provincial party can significantly affect its federal mate when it comes to motivating volunteers and grassroots activists.

For instance, voters in Nova Scotia recently elected a New Democrat government. At the federal level, "that's not transferable (directly) to the ballot box," says Nanos, "but volunteers will have a spring in their step."

At the grassroots level, agrees Maharaj, "activists tend to be one and the same people," provincially or federally. If Liberal party activists are "battered or disheartened" at one level of government, they may well feel that way when they think about helping the other.

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