

Tory polls suggest just three seats out of reach

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Conservative candidates are leading or tied for the lead in four of the six New Brunswick ridings Liberals won in 2006, says a senior Conservative who reviewed internal polls tracking voters' intentions late last week.

In Fredericton, Miramichi, Madwaska-Restigouche and Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe, the races have become "very, very tight," said the highly placed Conservative.

The Conservative candidates still trail significantly in only three ridings - Saint John and Beauséjour, held by Liberal MPs Paul Zed and Dominic LeBlanc, and in Acadie-Bathurst, held by the NDP's Yvon Godin, according to the Conservative source.

But Liberal campaign co-chair Georgie Day said she is not persuaded by the Conservative claims.

"All I can tell you is I'm in close touch with the Liberal candidates, and they tell me they're getting a good feeling," Day said. Zed said he is seeing no signs on the ground that the Conservative polling is accurate.

"You can take this to the bank - the current incumbent Liberal MPs are returning to Ottawa," Zed said.

Day said the Liberal Party is not doing any New Brunswick-specific polling that she is aware of.

The Liberals have been doing badly in national polls, but most have surveyed so few Atlantic Canadians that no provincial breakout is available.

For example, an Angus Reid poll released Saturday pegged Conservative support nationally at 40 per cent, compared to 21 per cent for each of the Liberals and the NDP.

In Atlantic Canada, the Liberals had the highest support at 37 per cent compared to the Conservatives' 34 per cent and 27 per cent for the NDP in that Angus Reid poll.

That three-per-cent gap would be a statistical tie given that margins of error are typically five per cent, plus or minus, for the smaller regional samples.

A daily CPAC-Nanos tracking poll released Saturday had the Conservatives at 36 per cent, the Liberals at 27 and the NDP at 19 in terms of national support.

In a Corporate Research Associates poll taken in mid-August, well before the Sept. 7 election call, Conservative support stood at 37 per cent, down one per cent, and Liberal support was 36 per cent, down from 43 per cent in May.

The New Democrats climbed to 22 per cent.

Zed said the national polls are not a reflection of the way voters decide in Atlantic Canada.

"In this region, there are 32 mini-elections with voters very focused on who their candidate is and what they're going to do for the riding," he said.

He also said he has more workers and more campaign contributions than he's had in his recent campaigns.

The Conservatives entered the race confident they will hold on to the three seats they already had in the province - New Brunswick Southwest, Fundy Royal and Tobique-Mactaquac.

"It wouldn't surprise me to see (Prime Minister Stephen Harper) in New Brunswick fairly soon," the source said. "He's smart enough to realize he can pick up seats here."

Compared to their hop-scotching across the country, the relative lack of attention national party leaders have given New Brunswick in the campaign seems to point to it not being a key battleground.

Harper has made just one brief appearance in the province - a Saturday morning announcement in Fredericton on Sept. 13 - since the campaign began.

Dion spent most of a day in Saint John on Sept. 11 while Layton has not been in New Brunswick yet. Green Party leader Elizabeth May's train stopped in Bathurst and Moncton this weekend.

The Conservative predicted that Veterans Affairs Minister Greg Thompson, who won his New Brunswick Southwest seat for a fifth time in 2006 with 54 per cent of the votes, will be traveling the province to campaign with Conservative candidates who are in close battles.

Former premier Bernard Lord, one of three national campaign co-chairs and the only francophone, has been focused on acting as a party spokesman in Quebec, but with the polling momentum, "we'll see more of him here, too," said the Conservative.