

He learned from mistakes as Ontario premier, Rae says

Liberals worry Tories will bombard public with negative ads about his economic baggage

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NOVEMBER 21, 2008

OTTAWA -- Bob Rae knows his challenge is electability and overcoming his legacy as an unpopular premier who couldn't govern his way out of a recession.

As he officially launched his bid yesterday to replace Stéphane Dion as the leader of the federal Liberal Party, Mr. Rae, 60, attempted to insulate himself against what he knows is coming: an onslaught of criticism from his Liberal opponents about his economic record in the early 1990s, and unbridled efforts by the Tories to define him as a leader to be avoided in turbulent times.

"I am extremely resilient," he said.

Mr. Rae told reporters he has learned from his mistakes when he was premier of Ontario, that he has the experience to lead in this difficult period, and that Ontarians have forgiven him - noting he has been elected twice in the province.

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He was also forced to defend himself against a poll, leaked to the media on the eve of his launch, showing that among the leadership contenders, he was considered the worst-suited to lead through a crisis.

Mr. Rae is running against fellow Toronto MP Michael Ignatieff, who is widely viewed as the front-runner, and New Brunswick MP Dominic LeBlanc. The new leader will be chosen in Vancouver next May, after a devastating election for the Liberals last month.

Humble and playing up his 30-year career in public service, Mr. Rae said that in order to expand the party, memberships should be free and the leader should have a permanent office in Western Canada to avoid the federal Liberals becoming simply the "416 party" (the Toronto area code).

That said, he is not ignoring the fact that Ontario is rich in votes and is key to Liberals forming a government.

"I believe that I am very popular in the province of Ontario," he said. "I believe that our government will be very popular in the province of Ontario ... and I can only tell you that I believe that to be true, for everything in my political experience tells me that it's true...."

Still, there are concerns among Liberals about his economic baggage and whether the Tories would bombard Canadians with negative ads about Mr. Rae, defining his leadership before he could define it himself. They did this to Mr. Dion with much success.

National pollster Nik Nanos said that if Mr. Rae was elected leader, he would be "red meat" for hardcore Conservatives. He said Mr. Rae will have trouble running away from his record, as Ontarians remember how difficult it was during the recession in the early 90s.

A Tory MP said Mr. Rae would be the easier opponent "because of his managing of the Ontario economy when he was premier. I think he would have been the stronger candidate if we were in good economic times, or on foreign policy issues, but Ignatieff is the stronger choice for Liberals now."

Tom Flanagan, professor of political science at the University of Calgary, who managed the Harper campaign in 2004 and was his senior adviser in the 2006 election, said that if he were still Conservative campaign manager, "I would go heavily negative against Rae early and do whatever damage I could."

However, Prof. Flanagan said Mr. Rae will not be as easy to attack as was Mr. Dion: "He appears personable and is fluently articulate in both languages, advantages that Dion didn't have. Dion could be defined by his opponents as an incompetent klutz, whereas Rae would have to be defined as dangerous, particularly in troubled economic times."

Prof. Flanagan compares attacking Mr. Rae to the assaults on Mr. Harper for having a hidden agenda and being neo-conservative. Those attacks may have defeated him in 2004 and held him to a minority in the last two elections, the professor said, but he did become Prime Minister in spite of them.

"Like Harper, if he wants to have a chance at winning, he'll have to take the first punch in the mouth, swallow the blood and keep on coming," Prof. Flanagan said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nanos said Mr. Rae, more than his opponents, needs to put forward a vision of where he wants to take the country. Canadians may see some of that today, as he lays out his economic plan in a speech in Toronto.

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Phillip Crawley, Publisher