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'We've got momentum,' Hampton says

NDP can overtake Tories, he insists
Steps up attack on leading Liberals

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LONDON, Ont.—The surging New Democrats can become the official opposition even if the faltering Conservatives win more of the popular vote, predicts a confident Howard Hampton.

Painting himself as the only alternative to Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty and stepping up his attacks on the front-running Liberals, Hampton yesterday said the NDP could overtake the Tories in seats.

"We've got momentum. We know we've got energy. It's pretty clear that the Conservatives are declining on a daily basis," the NDP leader told 120 enthusiastic supporters yesterday in London, Ont. "We're in the kind of situation where if we get 26, 27 per cent of the vote, we can win an awful lot of ridings."

A Toronto Star-EKOS Research Associates poll conducted Wednesday and Thursday shows the NDP at 17 per cent, up from 13 per cent three weeks ago. The Liberals are at 47.5 per cent and the Tories at 31 per cent. The survey of 1,023 people is considered accurate to within 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

"We know that our support across the province is coming up and in the 30 ridings that we track because they are bellwether ridings, our support is coming up substantially," said Hampton, referring to key ridings in and around Toronto, Oshawa, Hamilton, London, Peterborough and Sudbury.

So-called strategic voting — which hurt the NDP in 1999 as anti-Conservative voters threw support to the Liberals — is not expected to hinder the party next Thursday because of the massive Liberal lead.

That has meant traditional NDP voters are returning to the fold, strategists say.

"Our vote is very efficient," said Hampton, 51. "There are very few ridings that we will win with 70 per cent of the vote, but we will win all kinds of ridings with 42, 43, 44 per cent of the vote."

Yesterday, Hampton also hammered away at McGuinty's "flip-flops" on hydro privatization. He reminded voters that in December, 2001, McGuinty said he favoured the selling of Hydro One, the province's transmission grid, and then later changed his tune.

"Determining Dalton McGuinty's position on hydro privatization is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall," the NDP leader said earlier in Toronto.

To illustrate that point, two NDP aides tried to hammer red gelatin — satirically dubbed "Dalton-Berry Sell-O" to a wall with messy results.

The NDP unveiled a new television commercial yesterday attacking McGuinty and not even naming Eves. And last night in Essex, near Windsor, Hampton told 75 supporters they "don't have to vote out of fear, you can vote out of hope."

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