

Tories' Ontario tactics perplexing to pollsters

It's odd to pick fights with a province needed for majority, some say

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OTTAWA-When Toronto-area mayors warned that funding woes were putting urban infrastructure at risk, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty slapped them down, telling them to stop "whining."

When Premier Dalton McGuinty argued that Ontario deserved more seats in Ottawa, Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan dismissed him as the "small man" of Confederation.

And when two major reports raised the alarm about the desperate state of poverty in Toronto and the province, Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg rebutted the grim findings with his own "good news" - job creation is up and other statistics show poverty is on the decline.

In the last few weeks, Toronto has seen a belligerent side of federal Conservatism, an unyielding approach that offers the barest of nods to local concerns.

Not that Toronto, a Liberal bastion, has ever been a traditional stomping ground for the Conservatives.

But with an election looking likely over the next year - and the fact that Prime Minister Stephen Harper must win seats in the 905 region if he aspires to a majority - it's no wonder the Tories' version of political trash talk has raised eyebrows.

But more than that, it's raised hackles in a city and region where the Tories must score votes if they hope to be anything more than a minority government.

Which raises the question - have the Conservatives given up on Toronto, perhaps even Ontario?

"It seems to me they're putting more of their eggs in building up support in Quebec. I don't know if they've cut Ontario loose. I can't imagine you'd want to do that ... but it does look like an odd strategy right now," said Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research.

"I'm as perplexed as the next guy about where the Ontario strategy is."

The *Star* polled the pollsters last week for their thoughts on the Tory approach to Ontario and Toronto - and found them scratching their heads as to why the Conservatives seemed to be deliberately picking fights with the Ontario premier and Toronto-area mayors.

"When you start to get scrappy with issues of concern to urban voters, it's hard to do that and six months later go back and ask for their vote," said Nik Nanos, of Nanos Research.

"If majority was the name of the game, then they do need to make some sort of gains in Ontario, specifically suburban Ontario. You're not going to do that if you're viewed as being anti-urban," Nanos said.

But he also said it reinforces that Tory habit of talking to their "core constituencies - small-town, rural and also suburban Canadians," as well as Quebec.

"It basically means that Toronto, suburban Toronto and urban Ontario is not really part of that mix," Nanos said.

Still, the pollsters say the Tories have become needlessly "pugilistic."

For example, Flaherty's charge that mayors are "whining" didn't sit well with Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion, who blames her recent tax hike on Ottawa's lack of financial support for cities. She says she's ready to campaign against the Tories if Flaherty doesn't open the federal coffers.

"Our campaign will obviously be that the Conservative government is not responding to the needs of the municipalities," McCallion told a recent episode of Global TV's *Focus Ontario*.

"It will be up to the citizens which way they want to vote, but if they don't want their taxes to go up locally, and with the federal government not supporting us then I guess that will be pretty strong direction as to who they should vote for," she said.

Van Loan tangled with McGuinty over new federal legislation that would give British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario more seats to reflect their growing populations. But McGuinty says the proposal only gives Ontario 10

seats, roughly half of what it should get, based on population figures.

Van Loan branded him the "small man" of Confederation. The comment may have been forgiven as a slip of the tongue, the first time it was made.

But when it was repeated time and again in the Commons and in interviews, it became clear that Van Loan, whether on his own or sanctioned by the Prime Minister's Office, was deliberately trying to pick a fight with Queen's Park.

"I don't see where the electoral upside is in that," said Bruce Anderson, Harris/Decima president. "I have no way to explain what would be in it for the Conservatives to take a relatively confrontational stance, at least in rhetorical terms, with the Ontario government."

Van Loan insists that he's trying to do right by the province, even if his proposal only meets McGuinty halfway. And he flatly rejects any suggestions that his sharp talk will hurt party fortunes in the province.

For now, he's likely right, Anderson said. The tussles over representation, city funding and even poverty aren't exactly water cooler topics for Ontario voters, where Tories hold 41 seats.