

Tory plans playing well in suburbs

Family friendly approach appeals to centrist voters Liberal strategist warns `costing day' coming for Harper

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HAMILTON—The avalanche of social spending by the Liberals in the run-up to the election campaign appears to be shoring up the party's support among left-leaning Canadians, but it may have given the Conservatives just the opening they need to grab middle-of-the-road voters.

Yesterday's announcement by Conservative Leader Stephen Harper that he would provide a tax deduction of up to \$500 per child for parents who register their children in sports programs is the latest campaign plank with potential appeal beyond the Tories' core right-wing constituency.

The proposal follows Harper's widely noticed promises to trim the GST and give families \$1,200 a year per child to help pay for child care.

This positioning has afforded the Tories an excellent opportunity to generate support in the suburban belts like Toronto's 905 area where families are feeling strapped, says EKOS pollster Frank Graves.

"The Tories' child-care plan, the GST cut and the latest sports deduction — all of them are giving a flavour to Stephen Harper that a Conservative government would be less in your pocket, less intrusive and more concerned about hard-pressed families," Graves said.

He likens Harper's approach to the way former U.S. president Bill Clinton reached out to American "soccer moms" during his successful 1996 re-election effort.

In the early going in this campaign, the defining theme has been Paul Martin's vow to defend and expand social programs versus Harper's plans to give Canadians a break by reducing the cash they send to Ottawa.

Aiming his tax cuts directly at the middle-class, the Conservative leader says he wants to help "ordinary working people and their families who work hard, play by the rules and pay their taxes."

But, while the Conservative leader has been more successful at occupying the middle ground politically than in the last election, the Conservatives have yet to realize an upward bounce in polls as a result, Graves said. The opportunity for Harper to make gains with this approach is still there, he observed.

So far the Liberals have maintained their lead in opinion surveys, partly because Martin has been able to neutralize Harper's principal ideas. The Liberals blunted Harper's proposed GST reduction with \$30 billion in personal income tax cuts. And on daycare, Martin anted up another \$6 billion last week to expand the plan the Liberals began to put in place after the June 2004 election.

The Liberals say they are not concerned that the dynamics of the campaign are giving Harper an opening to go after centrist voters.

"Harper hasn't said what he won't do," remarked a Liberal strategist who maintained the Conservatives can't afford a raft of expensive social programs while also cutting the GST and other

taxes. "He's got a costing day coming."

And the Liberals are doing what they can to convince Canadians that Harper is not believable as a centrist by questioning his commitment to improving the health-care system and protecting the rights of minorities under the constitution.

"You've got to go through (the Tory platform) item by item," Martin said yesterday when asked if he believes the Conservatives have a hidden agenda.

Both the Liberals' and Conservatives' election strategists have much different options in the current campaign than might have been imagined just a year ago because of the huge, unexpected upsurge in federal tax revenues driven by the energy boom and a surprisingly resilient economy.

In a flurry of activity this fall, the Liberal government capitalized on a windfall of \$54 billion in accumulated surpluses by 2011 to earmark billions of dollars in new spending for immigrants, aboriginals, farmers, post-secondary students, small business and others.

The spending spree appears to be paying dividends. For instance, federal support for the struggling auto industry helped Martin win an endorsement from Canadian Auto Workers chief Buzz Hargrove.

By the same token, however, Ottawa's bulging coffers give the Conservatives a luxury they have not always enjoyed — the ability to propose tax cuts without taking an axe to government spending. This may let Harper dodge the Liberal axiom that he's a right-winger who poses a danger to health-care and other cherished social programs.

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