

Preparing to make the switch

Tories gain ground in 905 ridings

Region went largely Liberal last time

Jan. 14, 2006. 09:23 AM

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Manjit Sidhu is a card-carrying Liberal. He voted for Paul Martin's Liberals in 2004. In fact, he has always voted Liberal. He is active in his local Liberal riding association.

But the Brampton factory worker says that on Jan. 23 he will cast his ballot for Stephen Harper's Conservatives. A Liberal television ad, since withdrawn, that suggested Harper was planning to station armed troops in Canadian cities was the last straw.

"He (Martin) thinks he can lie and we won't understand," Sidhu says. "He thinks we're stupid."

Sidhu is not alone. Throughout the horseshoe of so-called 905 ridings that lie east, north and west of Toronto, voters are deserting the Liberals. An EKOS poll done for the *Star* estimates that about 44 per cent of voters in the 905 support the Conservatives compared to 33 per cent for the Liberals.

To call what's going on a Liberal collapse would be premature. But there is a sense of overwhelming disillusionment with Martin in a region whose 23 seats are key to any party that hopes to form a government.

The Liberals won 20 of those 23 seats last time, the Conservatives the other three.

Concurrently, there's a new willingness to try out the Conservatives — even among leftish voters who fear Harper is just too right wing.

"I'm not too keen on the Conservatives, but how else can you house clean?" computer technician Dave Archibald says over lunch at a Port Hope doughnut shop. A former ironworker, Archibald grew up in a union household and describes himself as "basically a New Democrat."

"I still remember (former Conservative prime minister) Brian Mulroney," he says with some distaste. "But something has to be done about the corruption."

But then that's the 905. In the realm of politics, the region is notoriously volatile. Provincially, it has veered from Liberal to Conservative and back to Liberals. Both former premier Mike Harris and current premier Dalton McGuinty owed their victories to the 905, which gets its nickname from the telephone prefix assigned to the area.

The reasons for this volatility have to do with the region's social complexity and its rapid growth. In terms of both ethnicity and class, it spans the spectrum. New immigrants and seventh-generation Canadians, truck drivers and nuclear engineers, all live cheek by jowl. Its voters, many of whom commute to work throughout the Greater Toronto Area, are supersaturated by media and vulnerable to skilful election advertising. The population is mobile and growing exponentially as new, near-

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identical subdivisions pop up across what once were the cornfields of Durham, Halton and Peel.

As a result, local candidates are less well-known than they are in more settled areas; conversely, party leaders are even more important. What looks like solid support for this or that party is, in reality, built on shifting sand. Two or three good pushes can bring the entire structure down.

Federally, the 905 has been almost completely Liberal red since Jean Chrétien ousted the Conservatives in 1993. But now, as I discover during three days of randomly interviewing voters across the region, it is very much in play again.

"I'm scared of the Conservatives because of Harris," says unemployed security officer Gord Bell, as he cradles 5-month-old daughter Colleen in the front hall of his Pickering townhouse. "It's hard to forgive and forget. I still may end up voting Liberal. I've always favoured the Liberals. But the Conservatives look quite good right now ... A change in government may be what we need."

What would finally convince him?

"Someone has to do something about gun crime. I have two kids and don't know if we can walk down the street in Toronto ... That's what driving me to the Conservatives. They say they'll do something. But I don't know if they are lies or not. If they can seriously do something about guns and crime, that would be a benefit."

A few blocks away, Troy Gibson, a 32-year-old event planner, says that for the first time in his life, he's going to vote Conservative.

"My parents tell me to go Liberal again," says Gibson, who lives at home with his mother and father. "But there's too much blood in the water. I'm thinking Stephen Harper now, even though he is inexperienced. His proposals are clearer than Martin's."

Troy's father, Fred, who has retired from the high-technology business, says he will stick with Martin.

"I am a Liberal. I don't always agree with them but I identify with them most closely ... I would like an independent leader who doesn't always follow the U.S. That's not the way with Harper."

In Markham, consultant Reg Jordan says he found Harper too frightening in 2004. "The gay thing (Harper's opposition to same-sex marriage) really turned me off his party. That is scary.

"But this time, I think he's going to leave abortion alone. His fiscal policy is better ... His social policy is on the edge of scary, but I don't think he'll do anything there."

And in the end, Jordan says, he sees no alternative.

"You just can't vote for the Liberals."

The Liberals are losing even traditional supporters among recent immigrants. In Markham, truck driver Supramaniam Uthayakumar says he's deserting the party and plans to vote Conservative because he doesn't think Martin's government gave enough help to victims of the 2004 tsunami in his native Sri Lanka.

But there are other reasons, too. Uthayakumar is finding it tougher to get his truck across the border into the U.S. His gasoline costs are up, which he blames on taxes.

"Before, I liked the job policy of the Liberals," he says. "But now it's different."

A few houses away, mortgage broker Karu Selliah expresses the uncertainty of someone who is not happy with the Liberals but not sure if he can trust the Conservatives.

"I'm 50-50," he says. "So far, I support the Liberals. I like what they say about gun control and gas prices; hopefully, they will do something. I'm still supporting the Liberals."

But then he contemplates the Conservatives.

"What he (Harper) promises is very positive. At the last minute, I might go to the Conservatives. I'm 50-50. We should give them a chance. The Liberals have been running the government for a long time. I think I will vote Conservative and give them a chance. Yes, I will go to the Conservatives."

But then he thinks again.

"I'm 50-50," he says. "It depends. There are a few more days left."

In Richmond Hill, software engineer Chris Gorgani is just preparing to sit down to dinner with his family. But he's willing to stand at his door and tick off some of the issues that he says are important.

First and foremost, he says, is health care. "None of them will deliver. The Conservatives are going to privatize; the Liberals just flash a little more money. Neither has a proper plan."

But the bottom line, he says, is that the Liberals have to go.

"I've voted Liberal the past several elections. But this time, I think it will be the Conservatives. Paul Martin should be sitting in the opposition chair."

Gorgani says he is making his choice with some trepidation and hopes Harper wins only enough seats to form a minority government.

"I'm not a Conservative. The Conservatives are a mirror image of the Republicans in the U.S. But let's give them a chance."

In Oshawa, Monique Collins says she feels badly for Martin. A long-time Liberal voter, she went with the Conservatives in 2004 and says she'll do the same again.

"I feel we need change," she says. "I like Stephen Harper's approach. He has a fresh, new image. The Liberals want to control your life from birth to death. Mr. Harper tried to give you back your life — to a point."

"It may not all work out. But at least it will be an attempt."

On the next block, auto worker Sandra Flintoff says she voted for Martin's Liberals in 2004 but will probably support the New Democrats this time.

"I wouldn't want to see an NDP majority," she says, "I haven't forgotten Rae Days (former Ontario premier Bob Rae's NDP government). That was a disaster."

"But I'm disappointed in the corruption the Liberals have been dishing out. I've no faith left in government."

The Conservatives? Flintoff says she has nothing against Harper. But to her, the Conservatives are the party of business, not auto workers.

In Port Hope, retired Bell employee Jaci Michaelis wrestles with her decision. "I'm undecided. I'm not Conservative, but I may vote for them. I'm getting closer to voting for them.

"Maybe we should let them in so they can fall flat on their face and wreck us like Mike Harris did. I'm afraid of what they don't say as much as what they do say. So, maybe I'll vote New Democrat, or Liberal — or Conservative."

Her husband, Frank, laughs. He says he will definitely vote for the Liberals. "I know what I get; with the others you don't know." He turns to his wife. "You're a sixth- or seventh-generation Canadian. I'm an immigrant (from Germany). We look at things differently."

A few doors away, Maureen Godfrey and Bruce Beatty invite me into their kitchen, where they pick up a conversation they've been engaged in for some time. Both cast ballots for the Liberals in 2004, which helped local MP Paul Macklin to squeak in by 313 votes. But this time, Beatty, a retired Pitney-Bowes worker, is edging toward the Conservatives.

"I'm fed up with the Liberals," he says. "It doesn't mean I won't vote for them. I'm on the fence. The Liberals are too lax with law and order. And that Young Offenders Act is a crock.

"But then I hear Harper on that same-sex thing or the abortion issue. When I read what he'd said (that he would allow a free vote in Parliament on banning same-sex marriage), I said 'I'm not voting for him.' Then, Martin said all of that stuff about the notwithstanding clause (Martin has promised to amend the Constitution so that elected MPs would no longer have the power to override certain kinds of Supreme Court decisions) and I disagree with that."

"Oh, I do too," says Godfrey, a bookkeeper. "We don't vote for judges. They're just supposed to interpret the law. ...

"Anyway, no one is promising anything for retired people."

Beatty picks it up again. "Then, there is this guy (former Harvard professor Michael Ignatieff) that the Liberals parachuted into Etobicoke (over the objection of the local riding association and without a proper nomination contest). And then there is (former Conservative MP Belinda) Stronach just switching (to the Liberals).

"So right now, I'm leaning to the Conservatives more."

Godfrey shakes her head. "I'll vote for Martin," she says. "I prefer him to Harper. I don't trust Harper. For some reason, there's something about him. As a woman. He has this little smirky smile. I just don't like it."

Indeed, if the Liberals have any hope in the 905, their best chance seems to lie with those voters, often women, who still can't stomach Harper. I run into plenty of them, too.

"Anybody but Stephen Harper," says Markham graphic designer Ann Orr.

"I will vote Liberal because I absolutely don't trust the man."

Orr lists Conservative policies, from gay marriage to child care, that she finds lacking or just plain wrong. But she keeps coming back to Harper.

"I just hope everyone gets their act together and doesn't give us a Conservative government ... If people think Stephen Harper has changed, they'll be in for a rude shock."

In Pickering, nurse Natasha Johnston says that while the Liberal government has been good in most areas, it went too far when it legalized same-sex marriage. She also doesn't approve of Martin's plan to remove Parliament's right to overturn certain kinds of Supreme Court decisions.

But she says she could never vote for Harper — not under any circumstances.

"There's just something about him," she says. "It's not his looks. There's just something about him."

A few doors away, Jacqueline Brackett shakes her head vehemently when asked about Harper.

"All he wants to do is take away, not give," she says. She'll be voting Liberal.

At a Canadian Tire store in Ajax, Ron and Leslie Spaeth say they too have no time for Harper.

"A snake in the grass," says Ron, a trucker.

"He never looks you straight in the eye," says Leslie, a computer trainer. "He reminds me of (Ontario Liberal Premier) Dalton McGuinty."

In Markham, 23-year-old Sarah Comper is making dinner when I appear at her front door.

"I'm looking at the Liberals," the Ryerson University business student says. "It's not that I like the Liberals. It's that I don't like the Conservatives."

"Stephen Harper scares me. I just don't know why."

Up the street, pharmaceutical sale representative Cathy Fullarton says she's always voted Liberal. "It's a scary thought," she says, referring to the recent sponsorship scandals associated with the Liberals. "I don't tell my neighbours."

But she doesn't think Harper would make a good prime minister.

"He doesn't seem firm," she says. "I see him as being swayed — especially when dealing with foreign countries ... like the United States or China."

Still, there are some female voters in the 905 region who are amenable to Harper.

Lucy Cunningham is a business development manager in Richmond Hill. She says she voted for the NDP in the last election, but this time will support the Conservatives.

"We need change," she says. "New blood." As someone who has lived in Alberta, she says she is not repelled by Harper. Quite the contrary.

"He's straightforward. He's good looking too. He's younger. And maybe the younger generation should have a chance at running Canada. ..."

"I know he loves Canada. Having said that, I don't see him as reaching out to a diverse culture."

In nearby Markham, Mary Brown says she too is not put off by Harper. She's planning to switch her vote to the Conservatives because she thinks, as finance minister during the sponsorship scandal, Martin should take some responsibility for whatever money was wasted.

Still, there are a few bright spots for the Liberals.

In a spanking new Bramalea subdivision, Karamjit Sarai explains that she will certainly vote Liberal again. The reason? She says her local Liberal MP, Gurbax Singh Malhi, is "for Punjabi people."

"All the people here are Punjabi," she says, pointing around her neighbourhood. "All will vote for Malhi."

Another possible source of Liberal support lies among voters who have been paying little attention to the past seven weeks of an election campaign that has not gone well for Martin.

At a Rona building supply store in Brampton, Bell Canada manager John Marsella says he hasn't been following the campaign and will probably vote Liberal "because I've always been a Liberal kind of guy."

He says he has a sense, "a gut feeling you might say," that Harper might win. And, he says, he's a little afraid of Harper — just as he was in 2004.

Then, there are voters like Larry Chan. He's a customer service representative in Markham whose recipe for elections is to vote the way his friends do.

"I follow the crowd usually," Chan says.

In 2004, he voted for the Conservatives. This time, he says he's not sure.

"I'm kind of confused. I've read too many articles."

But sometime before Jan. 23, he says, he'll get together with his friends. They'll tell him how they are going to vote. And he'll do the same.

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