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McGuinty targets Tory strongholds

Liberal leader 'not taking anything for granted'
Tories 'not toast,' Eves tells TV interviewer

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ORILLIA—Looking for as wide a sweep as possible in Thursday's election, Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty is making a push for seats in staunch Conservative strongholds.

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With polls showing that Ontario voters are poised to hand the Liberals a large majority, the frontrunner has shifted gears and is using the final four days of the campaign to try and pick up seats that were previously seen as beyond his reach.

McGuinty's tour swung through Barrie and Orillia yesterday. Today, he will be in North Bay, hometown of former premier Mike Harris.

As the Liberals embarked on the new, aggressive approach, Premier Ernie Eves, dogged over the weekend by the poll results, was telling a TV interviewer ``we are not toast" when told the Tories are losing the election.

``There is only one poll that counts . . . and that is on election day," Eves said on CTV's *Question Period*.

McGuinty, after a speech yesterday to more than 400 supporters here, said: "I'm not taking anything for granted in terms of our usual strengths and I'm not granting them any ridings in terms of their usual strengths."

Orillia is in Simcoe North, which Conservative incumbent Garfield Dunlop won in 1999 by almost 6,000 votes. It has never elected a Liberal, remaining Tory since Confederation.

McGuinty said the strategy now is to aggressively travel the province and visit as many local candidates as possible.

"We're going to get to as many ridings as we possibly can," he said. "I can't recall when there is this much excitement, this much enthusiasm, this much of an appetite for change in this riding."

An EKOS Research poll done for the Star showed the Liberals with 47.5 per cent of the decided vote. The Tories have 31.3 per cent and the NDP 17.3 per cent. Such results could see the Liberals winning more than 70 of the 103 seats in the Legislature.

In the run up to the provincial election call on Sept. 2, the Liberals were targeting 12 to 15 ridings that they felt they could win - just enough to hand them a slim majority government and unseat the Conservatives.

But with pollsters and campaign teams on the ground telling them that their chances of winning have improved dramatically across the province, the Liberals are spending the final few days of the campaign making stops in parts of Ontario that they had once ruled out.

Yesterday was McGuinty's first campaign swing through Simcoe County. By comparison, the Liberal tour has visited the London area no fewer than three times over the past three weeks in an effort to unseat four Conservatives in a part of the province targeted from the beginning.

"We've done over 80 stops so far and we've run a very aggressive campaign and we're just trying to get to as many ridings as we possibly can and we're spreading ourselves out a little bit more than we did in the past," he said. "We're very optimistic about just how receptive the Ontario public is to our change."

Local Liberal Gord Hogg, who is working for candidate Paul Sloan, said for the first time in decades, he senses that even this riding might have a change of heart on voting day. "I think all the signs are looking positive, we've got a chance here, we've got a great candidate and there is a mood for change," said Hogg, who lives in Midland.

Hogg said in 1999, Mike Harris' tour came through the riding at least three times and the election of another Tory was almost a given. "It's different this time, it feels different."

Most supporters at last evening's rally acknowledge that the Tories are a force, but added that the tide might even be turning here.

High school teacher Laurie McKelvey said Dunlop's refusal to attend an all-candidates' meeting at her school was an early misstep that might cost him on voting day.

"I think it was a sign that he's taking people for granted and with the way the Liberals are going I don't think he can take any vote for granted," she said. "He may regret deciding that the student vote didn't count."

McKelvey said McGuinty's swing through the riding helps the local campaign.

"I think it was a good morale booster for Sloan and the other candidates. ... There is a good chance (the Tories) could lose it here."

Retired teacher Fred Larsen said that after 30 years as a Liberal in the riding, he too sees a change.

"I think there is a sense here that this riding is going to make a very historical change," he said. "It's quite profound."

With the clock ticking down on the campaign, McGuinty warned workers and others to keep up the fast pace that he has set.

"Fight as hard as we can, fight as hard as we can, take nothing for granted, four days happens to be a lifetime in politics," he said when asked about his prospects. "We're going to get to as many people as we possibly can and I'm letting our candidates know and all of our teams on the ground that they've got to keep working as hard as they possible can."

Earlier yesterday, McGuinty, 48, stressed his party's plan to incorporate "character" education into aspects of the existing school curriculum in the province.

Speaking to a crowd of 100 supporters in Mississauga Centre, McGuinty quoted Martin Luther King on the need to instill more than just basic knowledge in young people.

"Martin Luther King Jr. said intelligence alone is not enough, intelligence, plus character, now that is the goal of true education." McGuinty said his character education program would be modelled on an existing program in the York Region District School Board, where parents met the teachers and students to identify character traits that they hoped to stress to young people.

"It doesn't matter who you talk to in terms of a parent, it doesn't matter what religion we practise, what culture is yours, what language you may have spoken first — parents around the world want those kinds of values instilled in their children. We are going to bring character education into public schools."

Avis Glaze, the director of education at the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board in the Peterborough area, was the administrator who introduced character education to students in York Region four years ago.

In an interview yesterday, Glaze said teachers found it easy to use the current provincial curriculum to bring out opportunities for character enhancement, and she said it has been backed up by both parents and the broader community.

"Parents are first in providing character education, schools support them, parental involvement is essential to this," she said.

Glaze said even the science curriculum is used to help students appreciate the value of honesty in their work.

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