

Tories target rural ridings on gun bill, trying to build majority

NDP MP Charlie Angus says the Conservatives are trying to whip up and pit rural and urban Canadians against each other.

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The Conservatives, who are running aggressive radio ads in 17 opposition rural swing ridings to pressure MPs to vote for this week's vote on the repeal of the long-gun registry, are using the divisive issue to try to win the ridings in the next election and in an effort to win a majority.

"Conservatives are very successful in building up small constituencies to add to their base and this is a way of doing it, you find a wedge issue that some feel very, very strongly about, they will vote with you regardless of what they think of other aspects of their platform and it's not important enough that even though the rest of the public don't agree with it, it's not important enough that they'll exclude you as a party that they vote for just because you're on this," said Ekos pollster Frank Graves.

A top Conservative source told *The Hill Times* last week that the vote is going to be close because of the current vacancies in the House and because some Liberal and NDP rural MPs have said they will support the bill, although Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff and NDP Leader Jack Layton are against it.

The Conservatives call the gun registry the former Liberal government's "billion-dollar boondoggle" and say the bill unfairly targets farmers and hunters, not criminals.

"It might surprise some that the Conservative majority could still be built, in part, in areas of rural Canada where the government does not currently hold seats and these opposition ridings that could be Conservative have not been lost on the party's strategy team," said one top Conservative official who did not want to be identified.

The Conservative source said that if the targeted MPs vote against C-391 "this will give the governing party a chance to remind voters of this in the next election campaign."

The Conservatives hold 143 seats, the Liberals hold 77 seats, the Bloc Québécois hold 47 seats, the NDP hold 36 seats, there is one Independent MP and four vacancies.

Fred DeLorey, director of communications for the Conservative Party of Canada, said the party is trying to get Tory MP Candice Hoepfner's (Portage-Lisgar, Man.) private member's Bill C-391 passed on Nov. 4 at second reading and moved into committee. He said the Conservatives want to get the bill passed "in its entirety," and not just moved into committee.

The Conservatives have flooded the mostly rural, some mixed and one urban riding with radio ads and political newsletters, or Ten Percenters, and have said they will stop the ads if the MPs publicly say they will support the bill.

Mr. Graves said the Conservatives' current strategy is "reminiscent of the way the Republicans and Karl Rove were successful in the States," as the party approaches majority territory "bit by bit adding to their core," targeting specific groups, such as new immigrants and minorities through the outreach work of Immigration Minister Jason Kenney (Calgary Southeast, Alta.) and rural constituencies by highlighting the gun registry.

"It seems to be working quite well, they are still short of a majority but certainly a majority is definitely in reach for the Conservatives, the slip in and out of majorities at the range in our polls each week in the last month," said Mr. Graves.

Liberal MP Wayne Easter (Malpeque, P.E.I.), one of the opposition MPs being targeted, said he's still unsure how he will vote but doesn't like being pressured by Tory radio ads.

Mr. Easter said he's in contact with gun owners in his rural riding, who have, for the most part, "stuck with him" and said he's not worried about losing their support over the ads. He said Conservatives are "playing games" with the gun registry.

"The whole purpose of the Conservatives in this issue is to try and use it as a wedge issue to, in effect, not deal with the problem and not put the issue behind us, but to continue to play games. This is what it's all about with Stephen Harper it's all about the message and never about the results," said Mr. Easter.

Only three of the targeted ridings were won by more than 20 per cent of the vote, in seven ridings the MPs won by five per cent or less and in 10 ridings the Conservatives came second.

But Mr. DeLorey said the issue has nothing to do with how much the party won by.

"We're running the ads in these ridings because these opposition MPs are the most likely to vote with us to end this wasteful and ineffective long-gun registry. These Members of Parliament have previously expressed that they don't support the gun registry. We want to make sure the constituents of these ridings are aware that this important bill is going to be voted on soon and that they should encourage their MP to support it," wrote Mr. DeLorey in an email to *The Hill Times*.

NDP MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay, Ont.), his party's critic on the gun registry and one of the targeted MPs, said he has a private member's motion, M-415, to require a panel to do a review of Canada's gun policy.

Mr. Angus said he will vote for C-391 in order to move it to committee but said the Conservatives "don't really care about what's good gun policy, they're only interested in where they can score a few points."

"They're full of shit, they don't care whether I vote for it or vote against it. To them this is an attempt to whip up rural Canadians, and pit rural Canadians against urban Canadians. It's a very ugly, divisive strategy, so they know where I stand, they know where I've always stood, they just don't care," said Mr. Angus.

Mr. Graves also said the fact that this is a private member's bill and not a government bill also signals their strategy and that this is "a cheque that they don't have to cash it."

But Government House Leader Jay Hill (Prince George-Peace River, B.C.) said a private member's bill is the "most successful way" under the rules of the House of getting legislation adopted, because, unlike government-introduced legislation, committees have up to 60 days to look at a bill (with a possible extension of 30 more days) and then it comes back to the House for a vote. A government bill could be delayed much more than that, said Mr. Hill, who described the issue as a "motherhood or bedrock Conservative policy."

"There's actually an advantage with private members' bills and very clearly there's the desire on the part of the Conservative caucus and individual Conservative MPs, in this case Candice Hooppner, to see this issue resolved and that's the reason why it was brought forward as a private member's bill," said Mr. Hill.

Enough opposition MPs have said they want to see the bill at committee to expect it to pass the second vote, but they are not saying whether they would vote for it to pass, after committee.

There are seven million guns registered, and estimates state that there could be as many as 20 million guns in the country. When the Conservatives gained power in 2006, it waived the licensing and registration fees for gun owners and extended the amnesty to register guns introduced in an amendment to original legislation to allow people to comply with the law on time. The Conservatives extended it twice and have indicated that they will extend it again.

The government introduced Bill S-5, the Long-Gun Registry Repeal Bill in the Senate on April 1. It has not yet been debated at second reading. The bill would repeal the long gun portion of the gun registry, but would still maintain a registry of prohibited and restricted firearms, such as hand guns.

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