

## Liberals set to tap stuffed war chest for advertising blitz

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OTTAWA -- The Liberals are counting on the sizable amount remaining in their war chest to finance an advertising blitz against the Conservatives, who are capitalizing on a carefully orchestrated and gaffe-free performance as the winter election campaign begins in earnest today.

The second half of the eight-week campaign is expected by all parties to be far more intense, with leaders' tours that are faster-paced and stop at more events each day, stepped-up advertising and, within about a week, the release of the parties' formal campaign platforms.

The Liberals adopted a strategy of keeping much of their powder dry before the Christmas holidays, and strategists now say they will have more money for advertising -- as much as a \$2-million advantage. And, the Liberals say, they have policy initiatives to announce when the campaign is attracting more attention.

The Tories dominated the first half of the campaign with daily policy announcements along with relatively heavy advertising, all aimed at rooting Conservative Leader Stephen Harper in the minds of Canadians as a mainstream, moderate leader with substantive proposals.

Two significant news events occurred over the holidays that appear likely to work in the Conservatives' favour, said Allan Gregg, chairman of the Strategic Counsel.

One is gun violence in Toronto. "We know concerns about crime are not restricted to Toronto," Mr. Gregg said. "In fact, it is greatest in communities like London, Ont., which is the heartland battleground" for seats.

The Conservatives, he said, are seen as the party that can tackle crime.

The second event was the announcement last week that the RCMP would conduct a criminal investigation into whether someone leaked Ottawa's planned changes to income trusts.

Regardless of the outcome of the investigation, some Canadians will read the decision to probe further to mean that "somebody is getting more money than they should," Mr. Gregg said.

"We know that is a flank of the Liberals that has been indelibly stained in the last two years. And every time that [the] issue has been in the absolute forefront of the voters' minds, the Liberals have lost ground, especially, and most precipitously in Ontario."

An SES poll conducted for CPAC cable network last week put Mr. Harper ahead of Liberal Leader Paul Martin in both trustworthiness and his vision for Canada.

Then, over the weekend, a survey by Decima Research pegged Liberal support at 32 per cent of decided voters, compared with 30 per cent who said they intend to back the Conservatives. Given the poll's margin of error of 3.1 percentage points, the two parties were in a statistical dead heat. The biggest regional shift was recorded in

Ontario, where the Liberals' once-commanding lead had shrunk.

There are as many as 15 Liberal seats that currently show signs of being vulnerable to the Tories if the political winds blow strongly in Mr. Harper's favour. Many are long shots. And many are in the southwestern part of the province, which is why the Conservative bus will travel to the region this week and undoubtedly make return trips.

David Docherty, chairman of the political science department at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., said the Conservatives appear to be reaching out to the so-called 905 belt surrounding Toronto, named for its telephone area code.

Cutting taxes and reducing government waste, two of Mr. Harper's main themes, helped former Ontario premier Mike Harris win the region in the 1990s, Prof. Docherty said. And "the tax deductions for putting your kids in hockey, etc. -- all of that stuff is clearly geared at 905."

But the Liberals believe they continue to hold some advantage.

Liberal strategists, speaking on condition they not be identified, said they have been attempting to monitor the Tories' spending and believe the Conservatives have spent roughly \$4-million on advertising, compared with about \$2-million for the Liberals.

The Conservatives agree that they spent far more on advertising in the first half of the campaign, although neither side will reveal exact figures.

"They've maybe blown a little more ammo vis-à-vis us than they should have," one Liberal strategist said. With the parties forced to conduct a longer-than-usual campaign within election-law spending limits of about \$18.5-million, they have been forced to make hard choices about where to put their money, and when to spend it.

The Conservatives have already begun warning of alleged Liberal plans to bombard Canadians with attack ads. They stated as much in a new television ad that began airing over the weekend.

However, Liberal strategists say the ads they have prepared for this week will be positive, although there is some debate about how far they should go in attacking Mr. Harper in later weeks.

This week, the Liberals will start to unveil the major planks of their platform as they lead up to the release of the formal platform document. As with the Conservatives, that document will essentially include little new information other than a breakdown of costs.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, intend to keep making daily policy announcements, but they concede that with big-ticket planks such as a GST cut or \$1,200 child-care payments to families, many of them will be "re-announcements" of policies the Conservatives adopted months ago. One insider said the party has one or two fresh "headline-grabbing" planks left.