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'Riot-type atmosphere' in Grit caucus

By Paco Francoli and Angelo Persichilli

More and more government backbenchers concerned about winning their seats in the next election are publicly denouncing the direction Prime Minister Jean Chrétien is taking his government, as he puts the final touches on his legacy agenda before stepping down in six months from his historic political era as party leader.

The furor was reignited last week in the wake of a new bill to decriminalize pot, with Grit MPs calling it the latest threat against their decade-old majority in the House of Commons.

The MPs say they are upset that the Prime Minister has chosen the twilight of his career to move on such controversial legislation, considering he won't be around to experience the fallout, if and when it comes.

"It's just another burden we have to bear into the next election," said Liberal MP Dan McTeague (Pickering-Ajax-Uxbridge, Ont.) who assailed the marijuana legislation last week along with several Grit colleagues.

Mr. McTeague said the Prime Minister would never have introduced the bill, which would decriminalize less than 15 grams of pot, if he were sticking around to fight another election.

Mr. Chrétien (Saint Maurice, Que.) has set his retirement date for Feb. 1, 2004, more than two months after the Liberals will select a new leader at the party's leadership convention in November.

"He knows it's a political minefield," said Mr. McTeague, adding that the legislation will be especially hard on Liberal MPs from rural ridings who tend to have more conservative populations. He said he feels secure in his mostly urban riding, but that the bill could have "the effect of saddling Members of Parliament with an obligation to defend those things which they are clearly uncomfortable in the next federal election."

For veteran Liberal MP Joe Volpe (Eglinton-Lawrence, Ont.), the government's new Cannabis Reform Bill, C-38, represents a break with the way the Liberals have been governing over the past decade, an approach built largely on the sound fiscal management of the nation's books.

"We were dealing in the past with an agenda that most people bought into, one that indicated that Liberals were good managers and un-intrusive when it came to people's lives," he said.

"If I were a member of the public, I would wonder what happened. Are Liberals moving away from what we expected of them, you know, being managerial, objective and macro, and now being intrusive and doing things that nobody is clamouring for? This isn't going to make society better."

A major concern among these disgruntled Liberals is that Mr. Chrétien is implementing his agenda without properly consulting his caucus. This applies not only for the pot bill, but several other pieces of legislation, such as the Political Finance Bill, C-24, which would bring in a complete ban of corporate and union donations to political parties.

"It's one of those bills that come right out of the blue," said Mr. Volpe, speaking of the pot bill.

The veteran MP dismissed the lead-up work done by the House and Senate committees which tabled reports on the issue last year, noting that committee reports are often ignored and shelved to gather dust. Another Senate committee in recent

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years also studied the issue of decriminalization.

Liberal MP Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough-Agincourt, Ont.), who is also leery of the pot bill, agrees with Mr. Volpe that the federal Cabinet isn't consulting with the Liberal caucus enough.

"The people who will have to go out and fight that election... they're not being listened to," he said.

"A lot of my colleagues share the frustrations that I'm facing, that you have an administration that is sunsetting and saying, 'Damn the torpedo, I'm going to do whatever I want to do.'"

Mr. Karygiannis told reporters last week that he believes the "the sooner" Mr. Chrétien steps down from office, "the better." He, like many Liberals within the caucus who support Paul Martin (LaSalle-fmard, Que.) in the party's leadership contest, contend that Mr. Chrétien has become a liability to the party.

Some MPs are hoping that once the House breaks for the summer recess, most likely on June 20, that Mr. Chrétien doesn't bother calling Parliament back in September, if only so that the caucus stops publicly feuding with itself over his agenda.

The new leader of the party, and, therefore, the next Prime Minister, will be known based on the results of delegate-selection meetings held over the Sept. 19-21 weekend, dubbed the "Super Weekend." It is expected Mr. Martin will easily earn more than 50 per cent of delegates at that time, making the November convention a foregone conclusion.

Liberal MP Roger Gallaway (Sarnia-Lambton, Ont.), also a Martin supporter, admitted that the window of opportunity for Mr. Chrétien to get his agenda through is closing fast.

"It's really difficult to envision that the House will sit [next fall]. If one considers the riot-type atmosphere in our caucus now, you must ask yourself if this is going to be a good scene," he said.

"A clear majority of legislation is emanating from who knows where. There is no caucus input. There is no caucus request for this legislation. Yet this stuff is flowing into the Chamber. In my view it's governance by bureaucracy."

Mr. Gallaway said that he is not concerned about his electoral fortunes but admitted that "Overall it's not helping the party. It's part of the poisoning process."

In the meantime, many Liberals are bracing themselves until the transition is complete.

"All this bickering and feuding is starting to hurt us. It will hurt us at the polls," said a Liberal MP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Another MP said that the upcoming weeks will be "very raucous" as members of the Liberal caucus continue to resist Mr. Chrétien's ambitious agenda, notably C-24 which represents the centrepiece of his legacy. Although the bill has been made a confidence vote, several MPs have indicated they won't support it unless major amendments are made.

Insiders say that the rumblings within the Liberal caucus stem in part from the fact some Liberal MPs, most of them Paul Martin supporters, are growing anxious about the way the political landscape is changing as the former finance minister gets ready to take over the reins of the party and the government.

Some ridings are looking vulnerable, particularly in vote-rich Ontario where the Liberals occupy all but five of the province's 103 seats. A number of circumstances have conspired over the last few months to threaten the Liberal advantage.

An SES and Sun poll released on May 30, indicated that although the Liberals' support increased from 48 per cent to 52 per cent, the poll also showed that when committed Liberal voters were asked to identify their second choice, the Tories came on top at 28 per cent, followed by the NDP at 25 per cent, the Canadian Alliance at nine per cent and the BQ at four per cent.

Said Nikita Nanos, president of the polling firm SES Canada Research Inc., in a statement accompanying the published poll: "Among Liberal voters, the PCs and the NDP are the clear second choice. In the next federal election, the governing Liberals may be victim to vote-splitting similar to the byelection in Perth Middlesex. In traditionally conservative rural areas in Ontario, for example, NDP growth at the Liberals' expense will help the PCs. Conversely, PC growth in urban areas may assist the NDP in making a breakthrough."

And former Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney's barn-burner of speech last week in Toronto raised a lot of hope amongst the Conservatives.

"I don't want to sound presumptuous," one Tory strategist told *The Hill Times*, "but I believe that none of the rural Ontario

seats are safe for the Liberals."

The results in the Perth-Middlesex byelection are on the minds of Liberal strategists, but "nobody wants to go even near to it" said one Liberal strategist.

For the Tory strategist: "The only thing we need is the NDP to be a little stronger and any riding in the 905-705-519 areas are up for grabs."

Insiders estimate that up to 40 ridings in Ontario hang in the balance, mostly those in which Liberal MPs won their seats by margins of less than 5,000 votes.

The Liberals' recent byelection loss in Perth-Middlesex proved to be a test case. Former Liberal MP John Richardson, who stepped down last fall for health reasons after winning the riding three times, won the seat in 2000 by just over 5,400 votes over Tory candidate, Gary Schellenberger.

But Mr. Schellenberger (Perth-Middlesex, Ont.) prevailed in last month's by-election over the Liberal candidate. The Liberal loss was attributed in large part to the surge of the NDP which saw its percentage of the vote increase by 12 points.

Under new NDP Leader Jack Layton, a former Toronto City councilor who has been aggressively pushing an urban agenda, the party seems poised to make inroads in the Greater Toronto Area (as well as other major cities) where the Liberals boast over 40 seats.

To compound matters is the fact the Liberal government has been severely criticized for failing to follow through on promises made in the last Throne Speech to help fix the sorry state of the crumbling infrastructure in Canada's cities and towns.

In last February's federal budget, Finance Minister John Manley (Ottawa South, Ont.) pledged \$3-billion over 10 years to help repair crumbling sewers, roads and bridges. But critics, including several city majors, said the budget's infrastructure allocation works out to only about \$100 million a year for more than 200,000 municipalities.

"The fact that it is not resolved has created tension," said Maria Minna, whose riding is located in downtown Toronto.

Ms. Minna (Beaches-East York, Ont.) said that, "as an MP from Toronto," she is preoccupied with two major policy items: infrastructure and how cities are financed and that on both those counts much remains unresolved.

She blamed the Ontario provincial government for failing to cooperate with the Liberal government. "If the province doesn't cooperate, we need to some point bypass the province so the public understands that we won't transfer monies to the provinces if they refuse to cooperate on these issues."

Art Eggleton (York Centre, Ont.), chair of the GTA caucus, dismissed concerns that some MPs from the Toronto region are growing worried about their ridings. He also said that the new pot bill won't make them vulnerable.

"I haven't heard anybody say, 'Well my riding is close in terms of vote counts and therefore I have to be careful about this [pot bill],'" he said.

Liberals are also girding for a backlash on the East Coast over the closure of the fisheries, and in the West voters are reeling over the implementation of the controversial Kyoto agreement.

But MPs, such as Mr. Karygiannis, are putting a brave face on, stressing that the arrival of Paul Martin as leader will offset any losses the party suffers.

"I would say that with Paul Martin at the helm, you are going to get seats won out in the west. You are going to get seats won in Alliance country. We sold memberships out in Alberta where people have never signed up," he said.

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