

Watson won't bring the heat to 'swing' seat

In a tough race in Ottawa West-Nepean, MPP puts his Liberal ties on backburner and runs on his record instead

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The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, September 15, 2007

A recent poll result that described Liberal MPP Jim Watson as trailing challenger Mike Patton in Ottawa West-Nepean was the subject of much corridor talk before Brian Mulroney's speech to the Canadian Club yesterday at the Ottawa Congress Centre.

On the surface, Watson's experience and profile in the community suggest he would be a tough incumbent to unseat. As the former mayor of Ottawa and current Minister of Health Promotion, Watson has more profile than any local candidate other than Premier Dalton McGuinty.

But Ipsos Reid released an analysis on Monday, the first day of the campaign, based on the last five publicly released opinion polls. The riding-by-riding breakdown showed Patton, former aide to Mayor Larry O'Brien, with a slight lead on Watson.

Conservative observers claimed yesterday that they were hearing similar anecdotal evidence in the community. Ottawa West-Nepean has long been a swing riding federally and provincially and has a strong Conservative base. A few Tories say that means Watson is facing a tough fight.

Some even went so far as to suggest that Watson was more vulnerable than Phil McNeely, the incumbent Liberal MPP in Ottawa-Orléans. McNeely, a backbencher, faces a tough challenger in Graham Fox, considered to be a rising star in the Conservative party.

Fox, the former chief of staff for Joe Clark, is the son of former Mulroney communications director Bill Fox, and is fluently bilingual. McNeely, a former Ottawa city councillor, stole the seat from former Conservative cabinet minister Brian Coburn in 2003, but probably has the lowest profile among local Liberal MPPs.

Not so fast, said some Liberals who attended the Mulroney event. By virtue of Watson's personal record, they claim, it would take a provincewide Liberal meltdown for him to lose his seat. The Conservatives are just spinning the story so that Watson looks vulnerable, they said.

Also, Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, pointed out that the numbers showing Patton ahead of Watson were based on a "vote model" that translates provincewide numbers into local results, making the riding-by-riding numbers less reliable than a poll conducted only in Ottawa West-Nepean.



CREDIT: Pat McGrath, the Ottawa Citizen
Liberal MPP Jim Watson's campaign carries the slogan 'Re-elect a good MPP,' and there's not much mention of the Liberal party in his signs and ads. The cabinet minister is hardly acting non-partisan, but in his riding, where he is in tough against Conservative candidate Mike Patton, he is his own man.

The fact that Watson is in a swing riding that has elected Conservatives in the past may help to explain why he appears to be distancing himself from his leader and his party.

Because of his experience, Watson has the capacity to appeal to a broader coalition of voters than just Liberal supporters. Because of his riding, he may have to.

Watson's campaign ads, including a strategically placed billboard inside Carlingwood Mall, carry the slogan "Re-elect a good MPP." There's not much mention of the Liberal party, Premier Dalton McGuinty or the fact that Watson is a cabinet minister in the current government. In an ad in a community newspaper, the Liberal party emblem was about four millimetres high and one centimetre wide, rendering the faces that are part of the logo almost microscopic and the word "Ontario" invisible.

Watson's campaign signs carry the same slogan. The Liberal party logo is the second-smallest item on the sign, next to the legally required message from his official agent.

To be fair, Watson is hardly acting non-partisan. He is one of the Liberals' most outspoken critics of Conservative leader John Tory. But in his own riding, rather than trumpeting his own party or leader, Watson seems to be positioning himself as a good constituency man. He may be hoping his personal record outside of party politics will get him votes that his Liberal affiliation won't.

In Ottawa West-Nepean, that may be the best strategy to get re-elected.

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One way to gauge the public profile of a local MPP is to check how many times his or her name appeared in the Citizen since the last provincial election.

Leaving aside Ottawa South MPP Dalton McGuinty, who gets disproportionate media exposure as premier, the runaway leader among the other five urban-area MPPs is Watson, who is legendary for his ability to court media attention. Watson's name has appeared in the Citizen more than 500 times since the government was sworn in.

Fellow cabinet minister and Ottawa-Vanier MPP Madeleine Meilleur is next with just over 100 mentions. Richard Patten of Ottawa Centre follows at just over 90, while McNeely is last among his colleagues at about 80.

Lisa MacLeod, the MPP for Nepean-Carleton, has appeared in the Citizen about 30 times since she was elected in a byelection 18 months ago.

Of course, there are different reasons for getting your name in the newspaper.

Half-a-dozen of McNeely's appearances are related to controversial comments he made last summer about Israel.

Watson, who is renowned for his frequent appearances at community events, has appeared in the Citizen's social column no fewer than 35 times in the last four years.

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Ontario Green Party leader Frank de Jong and Jim Watson have something other than the provincial election in common. They ran against each other for Ottawa city council in 1991.

Watson eventually won the campaign. De Jong, who was already a member of the Green party, campaigned for a reduction and eventual elimination of traffic on the Queen Elizabeth Driveway. He argued Ottawa should be free of pollution, poverty, garbage, guns and pesticides.

And he wrote a letter published in the Citizen arguing that the pending arrival of the Ottawa Senators would be bad for the city. De Jong claimed that the Senators would create added noise and pollution from cars going to the games, would promote a sedentary lifestyle of watching sports rather than participating in them, and would "aggravate inequality between the sexes" by encouraging fans to watch men playing hockey.

"NHL hockey players are exclusively male," de Jong pointed out.

"We will be conditioning our young people to believe that only watching men perform is worthwhile."

I guess the same could be said for the provincial leaders' debate.

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