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Fri, September 17, 2004

New life for Tories?**Recent polls show strong support for Ontario's PC's -- but the winner of tomorrow's leadership vote must bring the party together, says Christina Blizzard**

It may seem that the Ontario Progressive Conservative leadership race is snoozing to the wire, but behind the scenes there's furious activity in the three camps as John Tory, Jim Flaherty and Frank Klees all make a last-ditch appeal to delegates for their vote.

Recent polls by SES show the party -- without a new leader -- is neck-and-neck with the Liberals, meaning suddenly the leadership is a coveted prize.

SES numbers released yesterday show the PCs under departing leader Ernie Eves at 40% of the committed vote, Liberals at 38%, NDP 19%, and the Green Party at 3%. The uncommitted vote is 17%.

Those are startling figures so early in Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty's mandate. While his approval rating is up slightly since June, 46% still believe his performance is poor (with 25% of those rating it "very poor"). That's up 8% from June, but not exactly a ringing endorsement of his policies. A stunning 44% also think McGuinty is on the wrong track, while only 26% believe he is going the right way.

Voters like Tory

As for the PCs, another SES poll obtained by Sun Media reveals voters would be almost twice as likely to vote for them with John Tory as leader than Flaherty.

Pollsters asked which of the leadership candidates

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Christina Blizzard
New life for Tories?

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-- if any -- would make voters more likely to vote PC. Tory polled 21%; Flaherty 12% and Frank Klees 6%. Another 3% said "any" and 32% (one presumes core Liberals) said "none of the above." Another 25% said they were unsure.

So if party members choose wisely tomorrow, their new leader could take them to victory in the next election.

SES President Nik Nanos said the high percentage of unsure voters shows these are early days yet. "That said, comparatively at this time, John Tory has the greatest growth potential compared to Jim Flaherty or Frank Klees," Nanos said in an interview.

One in five Ontarians said they were more likely to vote Conservative if Tory were the leader, he noted.

"(The PCs) need to use this as a launching pad for defining themselves and the direction they want to take the party and the direction they would take the province if they were ever in the premier's chair."

Meanwhile, I asked longtime Liberal strategist Warren Kinsella, who was central to the campaign that swept McGuinty to victory last year, for his thoughts on the race. If Flaherty or Klees win, the Liberal strategy is easy -- they'll try to paint them as hard-right knuckle-draggers who will destroy health and education. But what about Tory? I asked Kinsella if Tory, whom he supported in an unsuccessful run for Toronto mayor last fall, has an Achilles heel.

It's not so much Tory who will give the Liberals ammunition, it's his caucus, Kinsella said, comparing Tory's dilemma to that of former Reform Party leader Preston Manning.

"John will share a lot of the problems that Preston Manning had, which is that whether you think John Tory or Preston Manning is a reasonable guy or not, Tory could be surrounded, like Manning was, with a lot of caucus members who voters consider to be too extreme," he said.

Klees and Flaherty yearn for a return to the Mike Harris era, while Tory wants to jump back to the Bill Davis era. "The problem for John Tory is that a lot of the Tory membership probably feel that salvation lies with Mike Harris and not Bill Davis," Kinsella said.

Clear message

The message from the polls is clear. The Tories aren't as dead as everyone thought they were after the election. They could restore their fortunes in time for the next vote. They need to pick someone who can bring the party's warring factions together and heal the rifts -- never an

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easy task. They need someone who can raise money and give the party a clear purpose.

All three are top-notch candidates, but John Tory's track record of listening to people and working with them, along with his classy bid for the mayoralty, tell me he's the guy the Tories need right now to get them back on track.



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