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:: PoliticsWatch News

Layton getting lost in the strategic shuffle

by Romeo St. Martin

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OTTAWA — A week after he appeared on the cover of Maclean's magazine in article that portrayed him as the biggest power broker on Parliament Hill, NDP Leader Jack Layton has found himself getting lost in the shuffle on the campaign trail.



NDP Leader Jack Layton.

Early media coverage of campaign 2006 is focusing on a two-way race outside of Quebec, with Conservative Leader Stephen Harper getting a lot of ink for his promises to cut the GST and to send \$1,200 a year to families for each children under the age of six.

Layton has come up with some good campaign promises, such as restoring \$4 billion in cuts to post-secondary education, aimed at wooing the youth vote.

But he also unveiled a promise this week on Bay Street to not raise taxes, but not introduce any new tax cuts either -- in effect, a promise not to do anything.

However, it is Harper's big promises that have overshadowed Layton's campaign.

Prime Minister Paul Martin is often quizzed by reporters about Harper's promises, while Layton's barely receive a mention.

In an interview with CBC News on Tuesday, Layton said he did not feel like his campaign was being overlooked.

"We're happy," he said. "People know we're out there to try to stop the privatization of health care. That's clear."

Although Layton says he's happy, he probably wasn't happy about what gave his campaign the most press so far.

The image of CAW president Buzz Hargrove hugging the prime minister at a union convention in Toronto and then giving the PM a CAW jacket.

That single development put Layton back on centre stage in the campaign, but for the wrong reasons.

And it came at a bad time.



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Layton spent the first few days on the campaign trail carefully visiting ridings where so-called strategic voting by NDPers to block the Conservatives from winning power actually cost the NDP seats.

In the final days of the 2004 campaign, a desperate Paul Martin went across the country urging NDP voters to vote Liberal.

"When you're talking to your friends who might vote NDP say: 'Think about the values that have built this great country.' And ask them if they want [Conservative Leader] Stephen Harper as prime minister," Martin said on the 2004 campaign trail. "And if they say no, then ask them to vote Liberal."

But in some cases, people shifting their votes from the NDP to the Liberals actually helped the Conservatives.

Places where this may have had an impact included Oshawa, where Conservative Colin Carrie came up the middle in a three-way race to beat NDP star candidate Sid Ryan.

On Thursday, Layton visited a CAW union hall in Oshawa where he announced an NDP auto strategy and warned about the dangers of strategic voting.

"In places like Oshawa, where the Liberals run third, a vote for the Liberals helps elect Stephen Harper Conservatives," Mr. Layton said.

The following day, however, all of Layton's work was damaged by Hargrove, who recommended the CAW endorse incumbent NDP MPs and "candidates in potentially winnable ridings."

But in other ridings: "I recommend that in other ridings, the CAW not endorse any specific candidates; rather, individual voters will need to decide what best contributes to electing a Liberal minority with NDP balance of power, and stopping Conservatives."

That would mean in many cases voting for Liberals.

"Mr. Hargrove is entitled to his opinions," was all Layton could say when asked about it.

But for political observers, Hargrove's pronouncement was devastating for the NDP.

"Under the guise of giving the Liberal campaign a shot in the arm, CAW leader Buzz Hargrove stabbed the NDP in the front last week," Toronto Star columnist Chantal Hebert wrote.

"Coming as it did on the very first week of the campaign, his kiss of life to Paul Martin felt more like a kiss of death intended for Jack Layton."

And Hargrove's strategic voting call didn't go unnoticed to pollsters.

"The early news in this campaign is the Layton/NDP slide," SES Research pollster Nik Nanos observed in a press release.

"Based on our polling completed last night Buzz Hargrove's comments have likely had an impact. Both the NDP ballot numbers and the percentage of Canadians who think Layton would make the best PM have experienced downward pressure. What is emerging at this point of the campaign is a two way race between the Liberals and the Conservatives."

Going largely unnoticed in this whole strategic voting campaign is that not only the possibility that NDP voters going to the Liberals could possibly cost the NDP seats in ridings they could win. It will cost them money, too.

Under new election financing laws, each vote the party receives in the election means \$1.75 in political financing from the government.

The more votes you win, the more money you get.

If the NDP loses a riding to a Liberal by 15,000 votes instead of 10,000 votes, it might not make much difference to Hargrove. But it would cost Layton and the NDP \$8,750 in federal financing.

Now multiply that by about 200 ridings.

In the months leading up to the election, Parliament Hill reporters would often ask the Conservatives and Layton two different questions on a regular basis.

For the Conservatives it was, "How are you going to counter the 'hidden agenda' tag the Liberals will pin on you during the election?"

And for Layton it was, "How are you going to stop NDP voters from voting Liberal like they did in the last election?"

Neither gave answers to stop the questions from being repeated over and over again.

And Layton did nothing to help his arguments in the spring when he negotiated a budget deal with the Liberals, which saw \$4.6 billion in increased social spending in exchange for NDP support of the government through the spring.

That deal was negotiated between Martin and Layton in a Toronto hotel room, with Hargrove interjecting on a speakerphone.

While Layton can argue that the NDP changed the budget, Martin can now argue that his priorities are similar to those of the NDP, so much so that he included some of them in his budget.

And if you don't trust him, then ask Hargrove. He was in on the budget talks.

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