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Aug. 24, 2005. 06:48 AM

## Liberals want Rae to join fold

Ex-NDP premier says Air-India his current priority  
After that,

ROBERT BENZIE  
QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF

Former Ontario NDP premier Bob Rae is under mounting pressure to run for the federal Liberals in the next election.

Some senior Liberals have confided they are trying to convince Rae to seek a federal seat in the vote expected early next year.

In an interview with the *Toronto Star* yesterday, Rae, 57, pointedly did not rule out a return to public life.

But he said he must complete his report for the federal government on whether a public inquiry should be held into the 1985 Air-India bombing before he can discuss politics.

"I hate to sound like a rote (but) while I'm doing the Air-India job, I'm not making any partisan comments of any kind," said Rae.

Prime Minister Paul Martin turns 67 on Sunday and will lead the party in the next election. But clearly, some of those who want Rae to run see him as a possible replacement for Martin.

"Bob is very popular in Quebec. He speaks French and is well thought of there," said one prominent Liberal, noting that since retiring from politics in 1996, Rae has spent years forging a sterling reputation as one of Canada's leading "statesmen."

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But Rae, who governed Ontario from 1990 to 1995, said "there's no vacancy" when asked about the federal Liberal leadership.

"As far as I'm concerned, there's no race," he said.

Earlier this year, Deputy Prime Minister Anne McLellan appointed Rae to give her independent advice on an inquiry that Air-India victims' relatives have sought since the terrorist bombing. All 329 people aboard Flight 182 died when it exploded off the coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985.

There have been growing calls for an inquiry since Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri were found not guilty of murder and conspiracy charges on March 16 after a lengthy trial in Vancouver. Allegations of police bungling have fuelled public outrage at the lack of a conviction in Canada's worst-ever mass murder.

Rae said serious work has him preoccupied for the weeks ahead.

"I won't be commenting or thinking about any other issues until after I do this Air-India thing. I'm hoping to have a report to the minister by the fall," he said.

As to his political plans after submitting his recommendations to McLellan, Rae was coy.

"We'll just have to see what happens," said Rae, whose brother John Rae was a senior adviser to former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien.

Sources note the former New Democrat, who publicly broke with the federal party in 2002 over its stance on the Middle East, is well regarded in Liberal circles.

The case for a Rae candidacy was bolstered with the release yesterday of a *Toronto Star*-SES Research Associates poll.

It said former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna, 57, now the Canadian ambassador to Washington, is the frontrunner in the undeclared leadership contest with support of 23 per cent of the 1,000 people surveyed.

Rae and former deputy prime minister John Manley, 55, were tied for second at 11 per cent apiece followed by former federal minister Martin Cauchon, 42, and Harvard University professor Michael Ignatieff, 58, at 4 per cent.

Among Ontarians polled, 20 per cent favoured Rae compared to 17 per cent who back McKenna.

Rae is no stranger to federal politics — he was an MP from 1978 until

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1982, when he moved to provincial politics. He was appointed as a member of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada by Chrétien in 1998 and works as a lawyer at Goodmans in Toronto.

Toronto MPs gathering in Regina this week as part of the Liberal summer caucus retreat are enthusiastic at the possibility of Rae joining their fold.

Public Health Minister Carolyn Bennett said she thought Rae would be a "fabulous, thoughtful asset to our team. We think the more the merrier."

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