

# Chong to carry Tory banner

Despite his high-profile defection from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's cabinet last November, Wellington-Halton Hills MP Michael Chong reaffirmed recently his intention to seek re-election for the Tories.

"I am planning on running again for my party," the 35-year-old said with a laugh after being told some local politicians were wondering whether he would continue to fly the Conservative flag.

This can only be bad news for anyone else on the ballot.

While Chong has proven very popular with his constituents—taking 50 per cent of the votes cast in the 2006 election—it is difficult even to find members of other parties with an ill word to say about him.

"I think he's a very dedicated young man who takes the job seriously," said former Liberal candidate Rod Finnie, who finished a distant second in last year's contest. "I think he's going to be difficult to defeat."

Mike Fich, president of the Wellington-Halton Hills Liberal riding association, said there has been speculation among local Liberals that Chong might not run again after he resigned his cabinet post four months ago over his government's position on Quebec nationhood.

"Some of the people considering running for us are waiting to see whether he's running again," Fich admitted. "Mike is a formidable candidate. If he runs we'll have an uphill battle. We have a better chance if he's not running again."

Brent Bouteiller, who collected about six per cent of the votes for the Green party last year,

said he expects to represent the party again the next time "as far as I know."

Bouteiller is under no illusion about the party's chances in Wellington-Halton Hills.

"Mike's a good guy and I know he's well-liked," he said of the current MP. "Our objective is to increase our vote count and that's what we're planning. It would be wonderful to unseat the incumbent, but we're not expecting to do that."

In the NDP camp, former candidate Noel Duignan, who finished third last year with about 12 per cent of ballots cast, confirmed he has filed his nomination papers but is not aware of anyone else considering challenging him.

Duignan is not concerned about Chong's popularity with local voters.

"Mike is very popular, but people are very fickle and things can change during an election campaign," he said.

Representatives of all parties, including the Tories, agreed Chong's departure from cabinet scored him points locally.

"That has helped us big time," said Peter Jonkman, president of the Wellington-Halton Hills federal Conservative riding association. "We've had a lot of people calling saying they voted Liberal last time but now they're supporting Mike."

Chong doesn't quarrel with this reality, but stressed yesterday he did not leave cabinet to boost his own chances of re-election.

"It was always about the best interest of the community I represent and the country... we all live in," the MP said.

—Torstar News Service



**MICHAEL CHONG**

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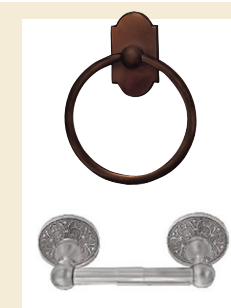
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