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OTTAWA—Some rural and northern New Democrat MPs may stay away from the upcoming vote on the long-gun registry, a move that could save the controversial program, the *Star* has learned.

The about-face is driven in part by tactics the Conservative government is employing as it tries to build support for killing the registry. One Conservative MP has accused Canada's police chiefs of plotting to use the registry to seize Canadians' rifles and shotguns.

"You've got the Conservatives turning off our rural guys," said Brad Lavigne, national director of the NDP. He added that two "very real options" are available to rural members — stay away or reverse their earlier support for the Conservative bill.

Staying away from the vote is the easier of the two, Lavigne said.

At least one of the 12 New Democrats who supported the Conservative bill on second reading will change his vote.

MP Charlie Angus (Timmins-James Bay) said his "Granny Angus" didn't raise him to run away from a fight and he will oppose Manitoba Conservative MP Candice Hoepfner's bill during the final House of Commons vote, even though he supported it earlier.

"The Conservatives are unfortunately creating an impression that rural Canadians are somehow nut jobs, but they are not. For me, at the end of the day, I just don't want to be standing beside these guys," Angus said.

"At this point I am going to vote against this bill because I think the Conservatives ... are treating Canadians as if they are fools on this."

Without the support of at least eight of the 12 NDP rural and northern members the Conservative private member's bill will fail in the Sept. 22 vote because both the Liberals and Bloc Québécois are expected to vote en masse against the bill to end the registry.

The New Democrats have also been swayed by a detailed RCMP report earlier this week that found the long-gun registry is cost-effective, efficient and an important public safety tool.

The NDP's rural MPs are wrestling with the political downsides of supporting the long-gun registry and, on the other hand, throwing their lot in with the Conservatives.

The battle over gun control, Lavigne said, has become a political fight between the Conservatives and the NDP for the hearts and minds of rural Canadians.

"This is an extremely difficult issue for the NDP because the party is split between rural and urban," said Henry Jacek, a political science professor at Hamilton's McMaster University.

However, he added, the Conservatives are making it easier for the NDP to walk away from Bill C-391 by harshly criticizing anyone who favours the registry, including the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the medical profession.

Lavigne explained that the NDP has more to lose in this vote compared to the Liberals because of the New Democrats' rural-urban split.

"Our caucus is comprised of about half and half ... Liberals have 91 per cent urban seats and less than 9 per cent are rural so they don't have much to lose to the Conservatives in rural Canada but we do. And if we hand over our rural caucus to Stephen Harper he gets a majority," he told the *Star*.

The NDP is holding a caucus retreat on Sept. 12-14 in Regina where the gun-control issue will be front and centre.

"We've got to get rural and urban Canadians speaking to each other again," Angus said.

Meanwhile, Hoepfner is sending letters to constituents in the ridings of the nine Liberals MPs who supported the bill to scrap the registry on second reading, reminding them that Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff is demanding this time around that the 74-member Grit caucus vote down her bill.