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Eves has 10 days to reverse trend

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Perhaps there's a dark corner somewhere on Premier Ernie Eves' campaign bus where a lonely political prisoner is marking off the remaining campaign days.

If so, there are now just 10 little marks waiting to be scratched off. Ten days for the Premier to reverse the substantial, and long-standing, deficit he faces compared with his Liberal opponents.

Depending upon which recent poll one elects to believe, Eves' Tories trail Dalton McGuinty's Liberals by anywhere from two points (Ekos) to five points (Compas) to 15 points (Ipsos-Reid), with a shrinking pool of undecideds. And a shrinking number of days.

It's true, 10 days is a lifetime in some campaigns. Up can become down, loser become winner, very quickly. Ask Kim Campbell, John Turner, Bob Rae, David Peterson.

But the thing is that Eves' campaign, so far anyway, may actually have worsened his situation instead of improving it. If so, his challenge for the next 10 days is tougher even than "simply" turning around public opinion. Mid-course campaign corrections are rarely attempted and, even more rarely, successful.

Many pros consider course changes inadvisable to even attempt; in a bad storm, you're usually better off staying on the big ship than hitting the life rafts. Usually.

If Eves' campaign is indeed misfiring, there could be several explanations. A shortage of serious content may be dulling voters to sleep. An incoherent vision could be confusing.

Policy-wise, this is a junk food election. Lots of empty calories, little nourishment. More packaging than content. Gimmicky toys in your happy meal (hydro rate caps, mortgage deductibility, school tax relief for seniors). But voters know who pays for those toys, and how little enduring value they have.

As for the negative ads — comparison campaigning may have earned a place in modern politics, but if they're just plain negative and demeaning they become little more than irritating background noise. They can even backfire.

Instead of presenting his own government's eight-year record in the most positive light, Eves' overemphasis on negative attacks on McGuinty may telegraph to voters a lack of pride in Tory accomplishments. If the government doesn't admire its record, why should voters?

The leadership issue itself might also be backfiring. While most polls still give Eves a marginal advantage over McGuinty in leadership approval, it's not certain how enduring that really is.

People have had doubts about McGuinty, as they often do about someone yet to serve. But these doubts seemed to have eased over the years, a positive sign for McGuinty. Meanwhile, nagging concerns about Eves may be growing, just as his campaign spotlights leadership.

From the outset, Eves faced the problem of an under-motivated core PC vote. People writing about the campaign feel it first-hand: Liberals and New Democrats are quick and intense about defending their leaders and platforms. Tories are more passive; telling symptoms.

All of which places tremendous pressure on Eves for Tuesday's leaders' debate.

Simply put, he needs a home run. Which means he's facing the kind of pressure faced by all batters told to swing for the fence. As any baseball fan can attest, fence-swinging produces more strikeouts, fly-outs and foul-outs than it does home runs. Ground hits are always safer — except they only produce singles, perhaps doubles. Late in the game, and behind by a couple of runs, singles are not what you need.

So as Eves goes to bat Tuesday, his coach will signal, "Swing away." (McGuinty's coach prays, "Don't swing at anything.") Hold your breath.

From California to Queen's Park, this is not an especially noble period in politics.

People who know better are routinely diminishing the profession with vacuous campaigns, negative tactics, and bandwagon politics — even as they bemoan the loss of respect for politics and politicians.

In Ottawa, the governing party approaches a historic once-in-a-decade generational leadership change with little excitement or energy or content. Little is demanded or even expected of the front-runner. In fact, in general, voters have been conditioned to expect little of candidates, even less of front-runners.

Eves may be an example of how candidates and voters alike are paying a price for being so undemanding of one another.

As with Kim Campbell a decade ago, it may have done Eves no good to have earned the leadership so easily, carried along by many people simultaneously leaping to an easy conclusion and skipping the essential step of subjecting the candidate to the learning experience and rigorous examination of a close contest.

It's late for Eves to turn this around. But not impossible. Like the baseball guy said, it ain't over till it's over.

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