



Sep. 27, 2003. 01:18 PM

Driving to the finish line

With just five days to go in the Ontario election campaign, a new Star poll shows the Liberals comfortably ahead

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With hindsight, this provincial election campaign turned around in its second week — on Sept. 10, to be precise.

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That's the day the Conservatives launched their attack ads aimed at Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty, the ones that declared that "he's still not up to the job."

The ads — since pulled — were so out of synch with the popular mood that there was an almost instant backlash. The Tory freefall began then and, according to today's Toronto Star/EKOS poll, it may not yet have ended. The Tories are at 31 per cent support among decided voters, down from 42 per cent at the beginning of the campaign, and the Liberals are at 48 per cent, up from 44 per cent.

To turn the campaign back in their favour, Premier Ernie Eves and the Tories needed a knock-out, or at least a clear win, over McGuinty in this week's televised leaders' debate. They did not get it.

Indeed, McGuinty, by remaining standing during the debate against withering attacks from both right (Eves) and left (NDP Leader Howard Hampton), may have enhanced his stature as a premier-in-waiting.

For today's poll shows that, for the first time, more people believe McGuinty, not Eves, would make "the best premier" (by 37 per cent to 33 per cent).

It is not unheard of for an opposition leader to overtake a sitting premier on this question in the last days of an election campaign. Mike Harris overtook Bob Rae on this question in the 1995 campaign, for example.

But that McGuinty has overtaken Eves demonstrates how badly the Conservative election plans have gone awry.

The Tories hoped to make this election a referendum on leadership and firmly believed that Eves would trump McGuinty on this point.

But the Tory election team — a group who used to gather votes for Harris — saddled Eves with an attack-style campaign and a right-wing platform. It may have suited Harris, but not Eves, who is essentially not a negative man and whose politics are centrist. His discomfort showed.

Beyond pulling the attack ads, however, the Tories did not make a mid-campaign switch in strategy. If anything, Eves stepped up his attacks on McGuinty.

In his post-debate speeches this week, Eves' voice literally rose to a shout at times as he accused McGuinty of "hiding" his intention to raise taxes and warned his audiences about the dangers of electing a Liberal government.

"The McGuinty Liberals will raise your taxes," he told a business crowd at a luncheon yesterday. "He (McGuinty) just doesn't want to tell you that."

Then he added this reminder: "I will cut your taxes."

It is as if the Tories are hoping that, if Eves says it loudly enough and often enough, the message will finally sink in with voters and the Liberal tide will be reversed before it sweeps them out of office.

But here again the Tories are out of synch with the public. It is not that voters are ignorant of Liberal policies, including the raising of corporate taxes and elimination of planned Tory personal tax cuts. Rather, they are well aware of the Liberals' platform, and they like it.

In the Star/EKOS poll, voters were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "We can't afford a tax cut for Ontario residents because we need to invest more money in health care and education." (That is essentially the Liberal platform.)

Some 65 per cent agreed compared with just 20 per cent who disagreed.

That poll result suggests the voters also don't believe the Tory line that "tax cuts pay for themselves." They have made the link in their minds between tax cuts and reductions in government services, notwithstanding Eves' insistence that this is "a false choice."

McGuinty, meanwhile, has run a "high road" campaign, stressing his own policies and values, not his opponents' shortcomings. It seems to have resonated with the public.

It almost didn't happen.

The Liberals thought of running a negative campaign themselves. The debate inside the party went back and forth over the past year. In the end, McGuinty didn't feel comfortable with a negative campaign and decided to stress the positive, in both his speeches and his television ads.

As a result, McGuinty is the candidate who has looked more "premierial" in this campaign. Indeed, at times he has sounded like former premier Bill Davis with a stump speech that begins with several self-deprecatory jokes (usually involving his own family), segues to some specific platform plank (usually education), and concludes with a statement of his values ("inclusive leadership that refrains from the politics of division)."

That speech had about 200 professional women spontaneously leaping from their seats with applause yesterday at a downtown Toronto hotel breakfast.

(An aside: There is a rather large gender gap in this campaign; women prefer McGuinty over Eves as premier by a margin of nine percentage points, whereas men prefer Eves by three percentage points.)

There was a slight wobble in the Liberal campaign at the outset when the Tories' negative tactics appeared to be working. (The early polls showed the two parties in a virtual dead heat.)

As a result, various Liberal surrogates — notably, incumbents George Smitherman and Gerry Phillips — were used to counterattack the Tories over the government's record. The Liberals have also benefited from the "not this time, Ernie" attack ad, paid for by a union coalition called "working families."

The union ad, in particular, has enraged the Tories.

Late yesterday, Tory incumbent Steve Gilchrist held an impromptu news conference at Queen's Park to accuse McGuinty of making "a deal with union bosses" to air the ad in exchange for favourable treatment after the election. He suggested there was a conspiracy involving McGuinty's office, Ontario unions, the AFL/CIO in the United States, and a Chicago-based political consultant.

(For the record, the Liberals deny the charge.)

Meanwhile, McGuinty himself has been able to stick to the "high road."

It looks now like a road to victory.

The problem for McGuinty, if he continues on to a big win on Thursday, is what he will do about all those expectations he has raised — among teachers, nurses, environmentalists, parents, students and tenants.

Sometimes in the dying days of a campaign, a leader who is comfortably in front will toss some new policies on the table so that he may claim a mandate to implement them after the election.

Harris did that near the end of the 1995 election with a pledge to defang rent controls, theretofore unmentioned in the campaign.

McGuinty is not adding new planks to his platform in the last days of this campaign, however. Rather, he is trying to dampen expectations with lines like: "It's going to take time" and "We're going to have to wait and see what the books show."

He is preparing us for a post-election letdown, after the "books" are opened and show the province is running a big deficit.

As for the NDP's Hampton, he clearly got a bounce out of the televised leaders' debate, in which he performed very well. According to the Star/EKOS poll, the New Democrats now have the support of 17 per cent of decided voters, up

from 13 per cent at the beginning of the campaign.

Even better news for Hampton is that the poll shows the Liberals with a comfortable lead over the Tories.

Thus, NDP-leaning voters do not have to worry that they may be keeping Eves and the Tories in office by casting a ballot for Hampton's party.

To make sure the voters got this message, Hampton pounded it home this week: "The Conservatives are done, are over in Ontario," he told a rally in Oshawa Thursday night. "The issue for people now is to make sure you get the change you want ... that will make a difference for working families in this province."

The NDP also launched a new television ad that dismisses the Tories while questioning the Liberal platform. "Do you really know what Dalton McGuinty stands for?" asks Hampton in the ad. "You know where I stand ... We'll lead the way on public auto insurance."

That message could work for Hampton. According to the Star/EKOS poll, 64 per cent of voters favour public auto insurance while just 17 per cent are opposed.

Accordingly, Hampton could see his vote continuing to rise in the final days, which might result in some new seats for the NDP. Oshawa, where union leader Sid Ryan is the NDP candidate, is clearly in the party's sights.

So the campaign appears to be ending well for Hampton and the NDP, who had been facing annihilation at the outset.

Barring a miracle, however, it will be McGuinty, not Hampton, in the premier's chair after Oct. 2.

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