

Ontario Tories are toast

John Tory could have been a contender, but he blew it on the leadership issue

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The Gazette

Wednesday, October 10, 2007

Dalton McGuinty is on cruise control, gliding to a Liberal majority in today's Ontario election. The only remaining question is the size of his victory.

All the polls published in the last two days agree McGuinty has a double-digit lead over John Tory's Conservatives, putting the Liberals clearly in majority territory in the 107-seat Ontario legislature.

What should have been a competitive campaign has instead become a cakewalk for McGuinty, who is not exactly a compelling campaigner.

What could have been an exciting campaign, especially by Ontario's standards, has instead become a boring one, even by Ontario standards.

A campaign that should have been about McGuinty's record instead became a campaign about Tory's promise to give public funding to private faith-based schools.

Tory was promising Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Muslim families the same funding enjoyed by Ontario's separate Catholic schools.

That would be the same Catholic system from which McGuinty graduated, which his children attend, and in which his wife is a teacher.

But there's no accounting for hypocrisy in politics, especially when the hypocrites aren't called to account.

Tory should have driven a stake through McGuinty's heart on his evident double standard of championing public education while his family uses separate schools. It could, and should, have been the defining moment of the Sept. 20 leaders' debate. Instead, Tory tried to make it about fairness and equity for the families of 53,000 kids, about two per cent of all the school children in Ontario.

Then, the Liberals successfully played to the voters' worst fears that Tory wanted to fund Islamic schools as a breeding ground for jihadists. You'd think it was Pakistan, not Ontario.

What should have been a non-issue in the campaign became the only issue in the campaign.

Tory couldn't get a hearing on it, and he couldn't change the conversation to something else.

Not that he didn't try. He clearly dominated the leaders' debate, in which the school funding issue took only five out of 90 minutes.

For the rest, McGuinty took hits from both Tory and NDP leader Howard Hampton on a long list of broken promises, and Ontario's sluggish economy.

At the outset of the campaign, McGuinty had enormous trust issues with voters. His litany of broken promises included a big health-care premium that penalized the poor, and a pledge to remove coal-generated power from Ontario's hard-pressed electricity system by 2007. One taxpayers' group actually wanted to sue him over the health tax, while McGuinty himself sued the parents of an autistic child. This guy had serious negatives.

Furthermore, Ontario, Canada's manufacturing heartland, lost nearly 100,000 manufacturing jobs on McGuinty's watch. Quite apart from being a blow to Ontario's economy, this was a serious blow to Ontario's pride. For the first time in memory, Ontario's unemployment rate surpassed the national average.

And then there was Ontario's leadership role in the federation, abdicated since Mike Harris's time, which Tory promised to restore.

McGuinty's negatives, and Tory's own positives should have been enough to make Tory's campaign extremely competitive.

But the faith-based school funding issue became an albatross around his neck. His candidates got a continuous earful at the door. There was a revolt of suburban soccer moms - in a recent SES Research poll for Sun Media, the Conservatives were down 18 points among women, and 12 points overall. This is called the gender gap. Even Catholic voters were annoyed, since Tory's promise put the spotlight on the privileged funding of their separate schools. Tory's own seat of Don Valley West, in suburban Toronto along the 401, is in jeopardy.

Faced with an incipient caucus revolt, Tory relented last week, saying he would submit the faith-based funding issue to a free vote in the legislature, but that as for himself he would be voting for it.

That nipped the caucus revolt, but was also inconvenient in terms of Tory's campaign slogan: "Leadership matters."

Actually, leadership ranked only fourth in vote drivers measured by the SES poll, after health care, education and faith-based schools.

And so far as that went, Tory was abdicating his own position. But just

because he stopped talking about it in the last week, didn't mean the Liberals would.

The Conservatives framed this issue as a question of conviction. But then they were unable to maintain caucus discipline behind the leader, forcing him to vacate the high ground.

A retreat, or climb down, is never a pretty picture. It might be strategic, but it isn't leadership. And that does matter.

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