

McGuinty's leadership under attack

Past campaign promises come back to haunt premier as parties hit the hustings

Don Butler, with files from Lee Greenberg, The Ottawa Citizen; James Cowan and Mary Vallis, National Post and Dalson Chen, The Windsor Star

The Ottawa Citizen

Tuesday, September 11, 2007

The leadership of Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty quickly emerged as a top issue as campaigning for the Oct. 10 provincial election officially began yesterday.

With a new poll indicating voters have questions about Mr. McGuinty's credibility, both opposition leaders zeroed in on what they clearly believe is the premier's Achilles heel: his failure to keep key election promises made in 2003.

Moments after Lt.-Gov. David Onley dissolved the legislature, triggering the month-long election campaign, Progressive Conservative leader John Tory told reporters that Mr. McGuinty has broken too many promises to remain premier.

"You cannot lead if you have lost credibility, if trust has been broken," said Mr. Tory, flanked by 45 signs, each listing an alleged broken promise.

Most prominent was Mr. McGuinty's decision to introduce a health care premium that raises \$2.6 billion a year in revenue, after promising not to raise taxes.

"Mr. McGuinty promised not to raise taxes and raised them," said Mr. Tory. "It is going to be a major issue because people have the right to know that their leaders are going to tell them the truth."

NDP leader Howard Hampton also took aim at Mr. McGuinty, saying voters won't be fooled again by Liberal promises.

"Four years ago, they put their trust in Dalton McGuinty," he said. "Now, they recognize that Mr. McGuinty will say anything, promise anything to get their votes -- but won't do anything about those promises after the election."

For his part, Mr. McGuinty declined to apologize for breaking his no-tax-increase pledge.

"I was faced with a difficult choice. I made a decision," he said. "Mr. Tory says

he disagrees with me. I know what he would have done -- he would have closed still more hospitals.

"The fact of the matter is, we've been able to keep the majority of our promises."

The Liberals have vastly reduced the number of promises they are making in this campaign, offering 71 commitments in their platform compared to 231 in 2003.

Meanwhile, more voters pick Mr. Tory than Mr. McGuinty when asked who would make the best premier, according to a survey released yesterday.

The online poll of nearly 1,400 people, conducted by Innovative Research Group Inc., found that 28 per cent favour Mr. Tory as premier, compared to 25 per cent picking Mr. McGuinty, and 10 per cent backing Mr. Hampton.

The poll was conducted between Aug. 30 and Sept. 5 and is considered accurate to within 2.6 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20.

Overall, 43 per cent of voters say they have an unfavourable view of the premier, with nearly one in four saying their view is "very unfavourable." Just one-third had a favourable view, with seven per cent choosing "very favourable."

Mr. Tory's favourable rating is only slightly higher, at 35 per cent, but just 31 per cent have an unfavourable view of him. And 13 per cent say they have a very favourable opinion.

Asked which of the party leaders best exemplifies strong leadership, Mr. Tory is the clear winner at 29 per cent. Mr. McGuinty and Mr. Hampton trail with 19 and six per cent respectively.

Nearly half associate Mr. McGuinty with flip-flops, versus just nine per cent for his Conservative rival. And 41 per cent say Mr. McGuinty makes unrealistic promises, compared to 17 per cent for Mr. Tory and 14 per cent for Mr. Hampton.

As well, 23 per cent say Mr. Tory has the best plan for the future, versus 20 per cent for Mr. McGuinty, and marginally more think the Conservative leader, rather than the premier, stands for what they believe.

Pollster Greg Lyle, managing director of Innovative Research Group, said it is unusual for an opposition leader to rank ahead of a premier on such key issues.

"This government clearly had a defining moment, and that defining moment was the first budget," Mr. Lyle said, in reference to the introduction of the health premium.

"Since then, things like the coal-fired plants and the autistic kids have

reinforced the idea that this government doesn't keep its promises."

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