

Tim Hudak, the Great Blue Hope

BY LEE GREENBERG, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN FEBRUARY 19, 2011



Ontario PC Leader Tim Hudak is popular, even though he's largely unknown outside political circles. This is a critical time for the man who would rule Ontario.

Photograph by: Jana Chytilova, The Ottawa Citizen

Progressive Conservative leader Tim Hudak has held only four jobs in his life — and the first three were just layovers on the trip to Queen's Park. If the political winds are favourable, his fifth will be premier of Ontario. Before the legislature resumes next week for a crucial session ahead of the fall election, sat down with Hudak to take the measure of the man the Tories expect will return them to power.

Lee Greenberg

TORONTO

Socialism is an unlikely political pedigree for the man tapped to lead a Conservative renaissance in Ontario.

But leftist politics plays a large role in Ontario Progressive Conservative Party leader Tim Hudak's background. One of his grandfathers was a labour leader in the petrochemical industry in Sarnia and a lifelong CCF and New Democrat activist. The other, his father's father, was a Czech immigrant and

construction worker — and an avowed Liberal.

“The Conservatives were the boss’s party,” Hudak says, smiling wryly, during a recent interview in his Queen’s Park office. “That’s the way they used to think of it.”

Now, as the boss’s boss, the 43-year-old is poised to become next premier of Ontario. Polls show he is virtually neck and neck with Premier Dalton McGuinty eight months ahead of the Oct. 6 election.

It’s a critical time for the man who would rule Ontario. He is popular, even though he’s largely unknown outside political circles. In his bid for wider recognition, Hudak is feasting on a menu of unpopular Liberal policies and decisions — focusing on pocketbook issues like rising hydro costs as well as perceived wasteful spending by the Liberals — while still holding his own policy cards very close to his chest.

It’s a focused plan that Hudak follows with zealous discipline. Even so, the young leader has encountered problems.

Hudak was blasted this week by Senator Wilbert Keon, a card-carrying Conservative, for his pledge to eliminate local health bureaucracies known as Local Health Integration Networks. Hudak says they are a waste of taxpayer money. Keon, chairman of the Champlain LHIN in Ottawa, suggested the policy was simplistic and ill-conceived. “I have no idea what his plan is and a general statement like that doesn’t make sense to me at all,” he said.

Impressions like that could spell trouble for Hudak.

Pollster Greg Lyle says name recognition for the little-known MPP “is probably the single most important factor” in the upcoming election.

“It’s not very complicated,” says Lyle, managing partner of Innovative Research Group. “He needs to let Ontarians meet him in a way that leaves them liking him, or at least respecting him.”

That battle for recognition is one he’s been fighting since he was first elected to the legislature in 1995 at the tender age of 27.

At the time, Hudak was still living in his parents’ home in the border community of Fort Erie.

His now-defunct riding of Niagara South hadn’t been held by Conservatives for more than three decades. Hudak decided to enter the campaign to prepare for a run later in life — “when I was an adult in my 40s or 50s,” he says. In the interim, he had hoped to work in Ottawa or at Queen’s Park helping shape Tory party policy.

“I remember meeting him and thinking, ‘Niagara South? Oh well, I won’t see you again,’” says John Baird, the Ottawa-born federal Conservative house leader and close friend.

Instead, Hudak was swept into office on a wave of pro-Conservative momentum that coalesced around Mike Harris's radical agenda of tax and spending cuts known as the Common Sense Revolution.

The province was emerging from five years of NDP rule at the time and was burdened by a then-historic deficit that topped \$10 billion, record numbers of welfare claimants and high taxes.

Hudak was attracted to Harris's plain-spoken conservatism, and promises of balanced budgets, reduced spending, lower taxes, and privatization of select Crown assets.

After his unexpected victory, Hudak found himself surrounded by a sea of other talented new MPPs. He became fast friends with Baird, Bart Maves and Jim Flaherty, a crew of fervent Harris disciples who would stick together for years to come.

"He was in with the guys who thought they were the elite," says Bill Murdoch, a rural Conservative MPP who clashed with Hudak early on but has since come to respect him. "They all thought they were pretty good. But he wasn't one of the mouthy ones like Baird and (Tony) Clement. Those guys would never shut up."

It wasn't the first time Hudak had been misjudged.

At his Catholic high school in nearby Welland, he was captain of the basketball team and a starring running back on the football team. He had a lot of talent in the classroom as well, but was nevertheless famously told by one guidance counsellor to "temper his expectations" when he spoke of his plans to head to university.

"Wonderful woman, she meant well, but she always saw me shooting hoops or throwing a football around and so she assumed I was more of a jock."

Hudak ultimately earned academic scholarships to the University of Western Ontario, where he completed an undergraduate degree in economics, as well as the University of Washington, in Seattle, where he finished a master's degree in the same subject.

Here again, in the early days of Mike Harris's government, he was underestimated.

"If you had have asked me in '95 I'd have said 'Oh, he's a hotshot but he's never going to be leader,'" says Murdoch.

Hudak was raised by two school teachers who were well known in their close-knit southern Ontario community. His father Pat coached basketball teams and little league and later became his son's campaign manager in 1999 and 2003.

"He has tremendous interpersonal skills," says Hudak. "You need someone like that as a campaign manager to get volunteers motivated. And he's tremendously well organized."

His mother, Anne Marie, a special needs teacher, was also a town councillor.

High school friends remember Hudak as a funny, but not flashy guy who was a big part of school life.

“He was the perfect teammate,” says Agi Mete, Hudak’s doubles badminton partner in the provincial finals. “It was all about sharing the responsibility.”

Conservatives describe him as quietly competent, a sound judge of public policy as well as the people it would impact. They say he has a good sense of humour, is even-tempered and inspires loyalty in his staff.

“He’s got a good gut,” says Baird. “He’s thoughtful. He’s incredibly comfortable in his own skin. And I think he’s got the capacity to grow on the job, which is a really underestimated trait in leaders.”

Outsiders who have watched his ascent are less impressed. Hudak does not have star quality presence and is often described as dull.

“He was very low-key in his ministerial positions,” says Peter Kormos, a veteran New Democratic legislator who has witnessed Hudak’s gradual ascent. “He was cautious. He didn’t go in like a bull in a china shop. He listened and learned. I watched him do that. I give him credit. He watched senior people do things, he watched their style and obviously earned the confidence of the premier.”

That steady performance was ultimately repaid by Harris, who named the then 31-year-old Hudak minister of northern development and mines at the outset of his second mandate. Hudak would later move to culture, tourism and recreation and then, under new leader Ernie Eves, was given a third portfolio — consumer and business services.

This in itself was a subtle nod to Hudak’s rising stature. Hudak and Baird were the only two cabinet ministers to support Flaherty until the final ballot in the party’s 2002 leadership race to choose a successor to Harris. Baird was demoted by Eves while Hudak was given a full portfolio.

That same year, Hudak married Deb Hutton, Harris’s most senior aide, and they instantly became a Conservative power couple. Hutton was a fierce tactician ironically nicknamed “Premier,” and the union — unfairly or not — quickly vaulted Hudak’s leadership prospects into the minds of many.

The couple have a daughter, Miller, who was born during the election campaign in 2007. She was born prematurely and continues to have health issues.

While Hudak prefers not to talk about those struggles publicly, he says the experience of fatherhood has given him a better grasp on the daily challenges families face.

“To have Miller in my life now and the sacrifices Debbie has made to put aside her career to be a stay-at-home mom really give me a better appreciation of the ... sacrifices people make to support families.”

Hudak would use this experience in his 2009 leadership bid, which came in the wake of the troubled, five-year reign of centrist John Tory.

His campaign featured a pledge to return to the straight-talking, tax-cutting conservatism of his political mentor, Mike Harris. His slogan, "Right for Ontario," was telling.

Harris (who declined a request to be interviewed for this story) endorsed Hudak, calling him "a champion for hard work, for lower taxes and for policies that make sense for middle-class families."

"There's a lot of common sense missing and I think Tim can bring it," he said at the time.

Hudak, in turn, welcomed the endorsement and speaks proudly of his time in Harris's government.

The Liberals, however, are feasting on the association between the two men, sounding ominous warnings about hospital closures and public sector cuts that, they say, are sure to accompany a Hudak government.

Hudak won't speculate on cuts, and has so far steadfastly refused Liberal pressure to release a campaign platform. Instead, he has hammered the government on increased spending and cost-of-living issues like the harmonized sales tax and rising hydro rates. He has opened the door to a range of tax cuts and made issues of public sector pay and government subsidies to green energy producers. In addition to the Local Health Integration Networks, he has also promised to abolish the provincial human rights tribunal.

His platform will be unveiled later this spring.

Meanwhile, Hudak appears unfazed by the attacks on Harris's Common Sense Revolution, which is generally viewed favourably within the party and negatively outside of it.

"I just find as I'm travelling across the province — I spend a lot of my time in the coffee shops, the town halls, doing the roundtables and stuff like that — it doesn't come up much at all," he says.

The Liberals are also expected to attack Hudak on his lack of real world experience. Prior to 1995, he only held three jobs — as a border guard, a travelling Walmart manager and an events planner for the Fort Erie summer festival — and all for brief spells.

"I am what I am," he says now, when asked about those potential attacks. "It just happened that fate gave me a chance (to enter elected office) when I was 27."

Since becoming leader, Hudak has established himself as a unifying force in the party.

He quickly incorporated his vanquished leadership rivals into his shadow cabinet and has moved swiftly to quell potential rifts.

Liberals privately regard him as a highly disciplined communicator, someone with a fearsome dedication to staying on message. It's a trait that can come off as boring.

He's got eight months to show that he isn't. Judging by Bill Murdoch's change of heart, the leader might just be able to pull it off.

Murdoch, a stubborn renegade within the party, once waged a one-man war against Hudak. The dispute centred around a bill he passed creating licensed marriage commissioners in 2002. Hudak, as minister responsible for the legislation, refused to enact it.

"I have no respect for the man whatsoever," Murdoch said one year later, swearing he would boycott party meetings as long as Hudak was caucus chair. Murdoch complained of the young cabinet minister's wooden demeanour at the time, interpreting it as "arrogance."

He now says he's seen a lot of growth in his former enemy.

"He's different now," he said. "He's more human."

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen