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Speak Out: February holiday Tory in key riding - Are you on the voters register?
Elections Ontario Conservatives remember backlash in Bill Davis era.

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In 1985, Progressive Conservative premier Frank Miller blamed the party's downfall – after 42 years in power – on the promise made by his predecessor Bill Davis to provide full funding to Catholic schools.

With an election looming Oct. 10, some are wondering if PC Leader John Tory's \$400 million pledge to extend public funding to faith-based schools for Jews, Muslims and other religions as an issue of fairness might keep the party from office again.

"It's the right thing to do, but the right thing isn't always the easiest way to get elected," says former Conservative cabinet minister Morley Kells, who blamed his own 1985 defeat on the controversial Davis promise.

"Just raising the issue brings it all back," notes former NDP education minister Dave Cooke.

"There's other issues floating around – health, energy, the environment – but there's nothing in those that grabs people's emotions and attention that funding of religious schools will do."

The debate has already prompted calls for a single, public school system with no taxpayer funding for religious schools as a cheaper solution to the fairness concerns Tory raises. Only the Green party supports such a move.

In 1985, the campaign was wrapping up when an outspoken Anglican archbishop weighed in on the Davis plan, announced the previous year.

"This is the way Hitler changed education in Germany ... by decree," charged Lewis Garnsworthy, who maintained the move, supported by the Liberals and New Democrats, needed more debate.

He would later reject assertions that his comments were pivotal in the election that reduced the Conservatives to a minority. A month later, the Tories were defeated in the Legislature when the Liberals and the NDP signed an accord, making David Peterson premier.

"I didn't bring the Miller government down. Mr. Miller shot himself in both feet," quipped Garnsworthy, who has since died.

While there are differences between then and now – Ontario is more diverse and Tory did not present his promise as a fait accompli, as then-premier Davis did – the Conservatives remain in their own crosshairs, says political science professor Brian Tanguay of Wilfrid Laurier University.

"Tory could say he's on the side of the angels on this one," Tanguay notes, referring to United Nations criticism of Ontario for funding Catholic religious schools but not others. "But Tory really is painting himself into a corner on this and must frame the debate from his perspective."

The PC leader has been attempting just that, saying religious schools would only get funding if they teach the Ontario curriculum and use certified teachers, and taking a

swat at Premier Dalton McGuinty's opposition to the idea over concerns it would segregate children and risk unravelling "social cohesion."

"They should receive the same education that Mr. McGuinty himself enjoyed," Tory says, noting McGuinty and his wife, Terri, a Catholic school teacher, both went to publicly funded faith-based schools, as did their four children.

These are points where McGuinty strays into crosshairs of his own, Tanguay says. "The government itself has a position that is logically incoherent," he adds, predicting school funding will become the major wedge issue of the campaign.

Finance Minister Greg Sorbara has acknowledged that McGuinty's language, which landed the premier in hot water with Jewish leaders, "is perhaps too strong," but said the province can't afford the additional expense of funding more religious education.of pesticide