

Editorial, October 3, 2007

ONTARIO VOTES

McGuinty best to lead Ontario

Despite all the complaints about how the Ontario election has been devoid of issues and passion, the fact is that over the last four weeks, Dalton McGuinty, John Tory and Howard Hampton have delivered a well-defined campaign with dramatically different visions of where they want to lead this province and that offers a real choice for voters when they go to the polls next Wednesday.

McGuinty has presented himself and his Liberal party as the ones who, since taking office in 2003, have made great strides toward rebuilding crucial public services that the Conservatives eviscerated during eight years of divisive government.

Tory has presented himself as a decent, thoughtful and genuinely progressive Conservative who cares about disadvantaged people. And Hampton has shown his New Democratic Party is still a strong voice on poverty and environmental issues, although they fall short on explaining how they would pay for all their promises.

Having studied all their platforms and listened closely to their arguments, we firmly endorse McGuinty and the Liberals as the best choice to lead Ontario for the next four years.

We make this endorsement based on the Liberals' record, especially on education, health care and social programs, their economic stewardship and their strong platform for the future.

In his four years as premier, McGuinty and his government have restored resources and stability to public schools, hired thousands of new nurses and cut wait times for key medical procedures. He also has made a credible start toward reducing poverty in Ontario. McGuinty has accomplished all this while at the same time eradicating a massive \$5.6 billion deficit he inherited from the Conservatives.

Just as important, McGuinty has restored to Ontario a sense of common purpose and inclusiveness, fundamental Canadian values that were ignored during years of damaging Conservative cuts.

At the start of the campaign, the Star highlighted six issues the province needs to address. Each leader has proposals on all of them. However, McGuinty has consistently advanced the most forward-looking, realistic plan for improving the public services that Ontarians rely on.

- **Poverty:** McGuinty made a bold commitment this week that should drive real progress on the poverty front when he pledged to set out firm poverty reduction targets and to make his government accountable for meeting them. Adding to the two main anti-poverty initiatives in the last budget – the new child benefit and the phase-in of a \$10.25 minimum wage by 2010 – concrete targets will oblige the government to introduce new policies and measures to fight poverty,

- **Cities:** The best way for Queen's Park to help cities would be to upload the costs of major provincial programs imposed on them almost a decade ago. All three leaders promise to take action once a special task force completes its review of downloading next year, but McGuinty has already moved on one front by uploading costs now incurred by cities for drug benefit and disability support programs.

- **Health care:** Over the next four years McGuinty would raise annual spending on health care by \$8.7 billion with the aim of further reducing wait times and investing more in home care and long-term care. While Tory and Hampton have made similar pledges, Tory would also open the door wider to private health care by allowing more private clinics to operate across the province.

- **Education:** On one of the most divisive issues in the campaign, Tory wants to use some of the available government money to extend public funding to faith-based schools. By contrast, the Liberals and NDP are proposing more ambitious agendas to bolster public education, including extending junior and senior kindergarten to full days.

- **Environment:** The Liberals are offering a realistic platform to close coal-fired power plants by 2014, refurbish nuclear stations and boost energy conservation and renewable energy sources. They also are considering expanding the Golden Horseshoe greenbelt.

- **Economy:** While offering some help to traditional industries, notably the auto sector, that face increasingly stiff foreign competition, the Liberals have created a forward-looking economic game plan that focuses on higher education and the next generation of jobs in areas such as biotechnology, communications and green technology.

Party policy aside, for many voters the key issue is leadership.

Indeed, Tory has made the slogan "leadership matters" a cornerstone of his campaign. He claims McGuinty lacks leadership, citing a string of "broken promises." And true, McGuinty failed to do everything he say he would, but we believe he should be judged on the promises he did deliver on, which were considerable, given the mess he inherited from the former Conservative government.

It is true that Tory has proved himself a capable party leader who has worked hard to steer the Conservatives away from Mike Harris's Common Sense Revolution and back toward the party's Bill Davis-era progressive roots. And many voters seem comfortable with Tory's personality and his compassion for the most vulnerable in society.

But Tory's political leadership skills are questionable. In fact, in this campaign, he has emerged as a divisive, wavering leader.

Despite promising a positive campaign, Tory unleashed negative attack ads aimed at linking McGuinty with violent crime in Toronto.

Despite vowing support for public health care, he is courting controversy by supporting more private health care.

Also, Tory's fiscal plan lacks credibility. He has pledged to axe the \$2.6 billion-a-year health tax that McGuinty imposed in 2004, at the same time as promising \$14.1 billion in higher spending on services. His projections of a balanced budget are based on extremely rosy predictions for revenue growth. He claims he could find \$1.4 billion in "savings and efficiencies," but offers no proposals for doing so.

And his ill-advised pledge to extend public funding to non-Catholic religious schools has split Ontarians deeply. Smelling trouble at the ballot box, Tory made a desperation move Monday to save his campaign by promising to hold a free vote on faith-based school funding in the Legislature if elected. Such frantic, last-minute decision-making is not a mark of an experienced political leader.

For all these reasons, the Star believes Dalton McGuinty and the Liberals deserve a second mandate in next Wednesday's election.