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September 24, 2003

Southwestern Ont., home to province's hot-button issues, region to watch

LONDON, Ont. (CP) -- If the campaign dust settles next week to reveal a new face at Ontario's political helm, it will be because of people like Dan Guilmette.

Guilmette was part of a rising tide of middle-class tax angst that defiantly hoisted self-proclaimed Tory "tax-fighter" Mike Harris off the backbenches and into the premier's office in 1995, and then re-elected him again in 1999.

Eight years later, Guilmette says his conscience is catching up with him.

"I voted Conservative for the last couple of times, but I won't vote 'em again," he said as he paused to talk politics outside a neighbourhood Wal-Mart in this hotly contested southwestern Ontario city.

"It's one thing to start cutting taxes, but we're starting to pay for everything we did."

First, it was Walkerton, the farm town a couple of hours north where tainted drinking water killed seven people and sickened thousands more three years ago, thanks in part to Tory government cutbacks.

Then, allegations of unsafe practices at an abattoir in nearby Aylmer put Tory spending cuts under the spotlight again as critics accused the Conservatives of jeopardizing public safety by slashing the number of full-time meat inspectors.

So spooked was Guilmette that he threw out \$60 worth of steak, despite reassurances from both his butcher and Premier Ernie Eves that the meat was perfectly safe.

But it wasn't until earlier this month, when his 77-year-old mother spent several rocky weeks in hospital with complications from a liver transplant, that Guilmette decided once and for all it was time for a change.

"The nurses and doctors are good, but there's just too much work and not enough time to do it," he said.

"I'm saying that I think the system is starting to fall apart, and there's got to be some areas where we pay taxes that we've got to have government responsibility for."

Guilmette apparently isn't alone: a recent Osprey Media-SES Research poll suggested a whopping 62 per cent of those surveyed in the region think it's time for a change in government in Ontario.

Health care, education, water testing and meat inspection are

Photo of the Day



among a number of hot issues in southwestern Ontario, which includes much of the province's most fertile farmland and seven of its 18 universities.

It's also an area with a strong Liberal tradition, one that the Conservatives successfully overcame in '95 and '99, said Henry Jacek, a professor of political science at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Tory political fortunes in Ontario depend on the party's ability to win back voters who were lured into their camp with the promise of tax relief four years ago.

"The whole strategy is to get the people back what they had in 1999," Jacek said.

"The people who are going to make the difference are the middle-aged, middle-income people who voted for the Tories the last time around."

Problem is, seniors -- long a stronghold of Conservative support in Ontario -- may not be as dependably Tory as they once were, which is why Eves spoke out early in the campaign on the death penalty and the traditional definition of marriage, two issues that resonate with older voters.

Joe Neilsen, a store manager in London, said he's sticking with the Conservatives because he needs the tax relief and feels Eves and company can better handle complex issues like hydro deregulation.

He doesn't like the idea of switching parties, but said some of his newly retired, formerly Tory friends have decided to switch.

"There's quite a bit of talk this morning from some other people -- they're just recently retired, these two guys -- and they're pretty much looking for some change themselves," said Neilsen, 59.

"Switching is one thing, but are you going to get the same old thing again?"

Older voters also tend to live in rural areas, where issues like school closures, nursing shortages, pension reform, gun control and agriculture are on the front burner -- and where the three leaders have spent a lot of time.

Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty has been busily courting the farm vote, promising a "new generation" of safety-net programs, new nutrient management rules and new markets for Ontario food.

The Liberals have also pledged to keep rural schools open and attract doctors and nurses to underserved areas. They've even suggested that the Conservatives are closet supporters of the federal gun registry.

The Tories are offering, among other things, more money for rural school boards, more health-care professionals, a break on property taxes for seniors, an end to mandatory retirement and a tax credit for family caregivers.

There's another factor, too, Jacek noted: students fed up with soaring tuition and cramped campuses are going to be in class on election day, something that hasn't happened since Bob Rae was elected in 1990.

"With the double cohort and overcrowding in the universities, there are a lot of people who feel they didn't get into the program of their choice, so that will be sitting there as well."

Among the ridings that promise to be nailbiters on Oct. 2 are London North-Centre, where Universities and Colleges Minister Dianne Cunningham is squaring off against professor and NDP

challenger Rebecca Coulter, and London West, where Tory incumbent Bob Wood, who won in 1999 by just 294 votes, could also be in for another squeaker against Liberal candidate Chris Bentley.

"It's a very interesting area indeed; the variables are very much in play down here," said Paul Nesbitt-Larking, a professor of political science at London's Huron University College.

"Six or seven of the ridings in this area could easily swing either way. That's why the leaders are paying it so much attention; it's fertile territory for seats."

And then there's Walkerton, newly relocated to the riding of Huron-Bruce, where pundits can't decide whether the biggest challenge facing Agriculture and Food Minister Helen Johns is lingering resentment over the tainted-water tragedy, her less-than-stellar handling of the Aylmer scandal or her government's failure to help farmers reeling from Canada's mad-cow crisis.

"Some people say the Walkerton thing doesn't make any difference to how people are going to vote; they'll vote on the basis of their traditions and general expectations of government and that's it," Nesbitt-Larking said.

"Others say quite the contrary, that Walkerton is going to be a factor and look out Helen Johns, your seat's on the line."

Two weeks ago, a leaked cabinet document from last year indicated Johns and senior ministry officials had major concerns about the food-safety system in the province and the potential health risks. Meat inspectors have also complained that their safety concerns have been ignored.

But Johns has been all but invisible on the meat file, preferring instead to campaign in a riding she freely agrees is at risk of falling out of Tory hands.

With or without Walkerton or Aylmer, it's a vulnerable seat because Johns, who's considered popular with farmers, only won by 1,800 votes in 1999.

"I am campaigning first but I am certainly handling the issues," she said earlier this month. "I'm doing what I can with the ministry (but) I have very big concerns ...this riding is targeted, as you all know."

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