

Stephen Maher

The way voters are seeing it

IT'S FUNNY the things people say to you when you wander around Nova Scotia with a tape recorder, asking people on street corners and in coffee shops how they're going to vote and why.

Here's the worst thing they say: "They're all a bunch of crooks."

No no, no. It's not true, and it's not right to say it.

Nova Scotia has 11 incumbent MPs. None of them are crooks. I would be very surprised if any of them are ever found to be crooks.

They make mistakes. They have limits. They sometimes, I'm sure, do the easy thing instead of the right thing, just like the rest of us. But they're real people, with families and friends, and it's not right to call them crooks.

It's easier in some places to get people to talk about politics. In Cape Breton, just about everybody you ask will tell you what they think, often in a very colourful way. La Cuisine Acadienne in Louisdale is a good place to talk politics early in the morning.

Marian Marchand told me she was a Tory because of her family.

"My father would turn in his grave if I voted Liberal," she said. "He said it was a mortal sin if you voted Liberal."

The saddest response I got was a man - a former Tory - who told me he swore off voting when his son was fired from his job working on a provincial road crew when John Savage's Liberal government was elected.

In small towns in the Valley, you might as well ask people on the street about their sex lives as ask them about politics.

I stood in downtown Berwick for an hour the other day, asking people if they would discuss politics.

"Two things I never discuss in public," said one older man, holding out two fingers. "One, politics, and two, religion."

People in Berwick are polite as they tell you they don't want to discuss politics, but you get the strong sense that politics is a private matter around here.

The only person in Berwick who answered my question was John Eaton, and he looked like he really didn't want to, but he felt it was his civic responsibility.

Here's what he said: "I probably will vote for Robert Thibault, which is the Liberal party. That's because all of the other circumstances involved, and I'm not 100 per cent sure about Stephen Harper and I'm not 100 per cent sure about the NDP, and so, it's the lesser of evils. (Mr. Martin) has started something and it looks like it

might come together eventually and, hopefully, it will, whereas the other parties have to start with something brand, spanking new."

Mr. Eaton said that Mr. Thibault, the incumbent Liberal MP for West Nova, and challengers Tory Greg Kerr and NDPer Arthur Bull are "all fine gentlemen."

Many Nova Scotians seem to have been thinking along the same lines as Mr. Eaton for the past few years. Since the merger of the Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance under the leadership of Harper, voters here have been uncomfortable with the new party.

Bluenose Conservatives have a tradition of being on the red side. Robert Stanfield certainly was, and the grassroots supported Joe Clark over Brian Mulroney in the leadership race of 1983, while the party establishment backed Mr. Mulroney.

In the last election, many former PC voters switched to the Liberals. There is no guarantee that they'll stay there, and some recent numbers suggest the region may be warming to the new Tories.

According to the **SES Research** daily tracking poll, the Conservatives have enjoyed a spike in the region this week. The sample size in the region is so small that the margin of error is 10 per cent, so you can't take these numbers to the bank. This is raw data, not evidence, but it's something to watch. The poll shows the Liberals at 45 points, the Tories at 40 and the NDP at 12 in the region.

When Mr. Harper was down here at the beginning of the campaign, he finally apologized for his old comment about the region having a "culture of defeat." So far in this campaign, he's pitched a lot of ideas, some of which may be connecting. Fishermen would like the \$500,000 capital gains exemption idea, and the proposal to provide financial help to families with children may be appealing to Nova Scotia families with one income who look after their kids themselves.

Many people think this whole federal campaign is about Mr. Harper. Many Canadians are tired of Paul Martin and ready for a change of government. But they'll only switch if they trust Mr. Harper. Not one Nova Scotian I've interviewed over the past few weeks has said anything good about Mr. Harper, and several people have told me they don't like him at all.

"What I get is Harper's more of an out West guy," said Donny Burt of Louisdale.

A young fellow working behind the counter at a drugstore in Glace Bay had harsher criticism.

"Paul Martin's a crook," he said. "Stephen Harper's a nut. Who you going to vote for? The Liberals will steal your money with the sponsorship program, but if I vote, I'll probably vote Liberal. That Stephen Harper, I think he's the devil."

In the business, that's what they call a strong negative.

The Tories know their pitchman is a problem, and they hope people just dislike him.

"We elect people we don't like," strategist Goldy Hyder told the Toronto Star this week. "We don't elect people we are scared of. Dislike is acceptable."

The strong anti-Harper feeling is bad news for the NDP and good news for the Grits.

Every Acadia student I talked to on the street in Wolfville the other day told me they would like to vote NDP, but plan to vote Liberal, because they're afraid of electing a Conservative government.

I want to thank the many people who e-mailed to let me know I made a stupid mistake in my column last Saturday.

I wrote that Charles Tupper was the only Nova Scotian to be elected prime minister

Two other Nova Scotians have served as prime minister, and I should have known that. They were Sir John Thompson of Halifax (1892-1894), the first Catholic prime minister, and Sir Robert Borden of Grand Pre (1911-1920).

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