

Murray Campbell

McGuinty runs risk of facing judgment that befell Eves



BY MURRAY CAMPBELL

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There are precious few parallels in the careers of Ernie Eves and Dalton McGuinty. But if the current Liberal Premier is not quick on his feet, he may follow his Progressive Conservative predecessor in succumbing to a political mark of Cain.

A new poll by the Strategic Counsel suggests that Mr. McGuinty is having a great deal of trouble undoing the damage of his first eight months in office when he reversed himself on some key campaign promises. First, he uncapped electricity rates and then he backed down from a threat to forbid housing on the Oak Ridges Moraine. Most damagingly, he overrode his solemn pledge not to raise taxes by imposing the largest tax increase in Ontario history.

The effect of those moves is still being felt in the polls if you look at them closely enough. The top line of the Strategic Counsel survey shows the Premier is seen as "believable" by 55 per cent of Ontarians, compared to 42 per cent who find him "unbelievable." Given everything that has transpired in the first two years of the Liberal government, this should be comforting to Mr. McGuinty. Majority governments are usually formed with about 43 per cent of the vote and if the Liberals can translate that 55 per cent figure (and the 42 per cent who believe Ontario is on the right track) into election-day support, they will be sitting pretty.

But the breakdown of this opinion is more complex. Just 8 per cent find the Premier "very believable" while 47 per cent offer a more tepid "somewhat believable." Contrast this with the 21 per cent who find him "very unbelievable" and the equal number who offer a more mellow "somewhat unbelievable."

Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory does better, if only because opposition leaders have little to do but criticize a government. The pair score comparably on making a "favourable impression" -- 45 per cent for the Premier and 44 per cent for the Conservative -- but 46 per cent see the Premier in an unfavourable light, compared with 23 per cent for his opponent. New Democrat Leader Howard Hampton has a 38-32 per cent split.

The Premier said in a recent interview that voters were coming to accept that he did the right thing. "It was my most difficult decision and I hated having to do it," he said, "but I think more and more Ontarians are coming to understand that it was the right decision in the circumstances and that's to be found in the results that we get."

But it's clear that a sense of betrayal lingers 18 months after the budget that brought in the health care premiums. "The first year of broken promises is still lingering; it's still a problem," said Tim Woolstencroft, managing partner of the Strategic Counsel.

Other polls are picking this up as well. For example, a recent survey by Innovative Research Group found that the opposition has been successful in tagging Mr. McGuinty as a politician who makes unrealistic promises and flip-flops on issues. An SES poll in September asked respondents what word they would use to express their dislike for the Premier and 25 per cent said "liar." It was a much-improved score from a poll the previous February but it still has to sting.

It's also clear from the Strategic Counsel poll that the health premium remains contentious since 46 per cent of those surveyed believe it was the wrong thing to do, compared with 44 per cent who support it. Again, the percentage of those who abhor the premium has declined since the immediate aftermath of the budget. But it remains high despite the considerable effort the government has made to proclaim the progress it has made in improving access to key medical procedures, securing peace with doctors and nurses and re-equipping hospitals.

Which brings us back to Mr. Eves. In his 18 months in office, he zigzagged from the right to the centre and back again and his government's standing in the polls bounced around like a bobble-head doll. But even as he nipped at Mr. McGuinty's heels, he couldn't shake a persistent belief by 60 per cent of voters that it was time for a change.

Similarly, support for the Liberals has gone up and down. In this most recent survey, they are at 37 per cent, three points ahead of the Tories and 16 points ahead of the NDP. But no lead is secure as long as a larger number of voters find they can't believe Mr. McGuinty.

mcampbell@globeandmail.ca

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