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Flaherty gets personal with attack on Eves

Speech in Ottawa: Calls front-runner 'a pale pink imitation of Dalton McGuinty'

Robert Benzie
National Post

The race to succeed Mike Harris as Ontario Premier took a caustic turn yesterday when contender Jim Flaherty likened leadership front-runner Ernie Eves to a "pale pink imitation" of Dalton McGuinty, the Liberal leader.

Mr. Flaherty, who replaced Mr. Eves as Deputy Premier and Minister of Finance last year, derided his predecessor for trying to take the Conservative party "back to the past -- to a mushier, blander kind of Toryism."



Pat McGrath, Ottawa Citizen

Jim Flaherty, the Ontario Minister of Finance, says Ernie Eves is vague and uncertain.

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60-DAY SEARCH

"Do we want the kind of conservatism that continues to build on the gains of the Common Sense Revolution, or do we want to go back to that outdated conservatism of the past, when Tories governed blandly from the comfort of the country club?" Mr. Flaherty said at a Rotary luncheon at the Ottawa Hunt and Golf Club.



"Members of our party tell me overwhelmingly they want more Common Sense Revolution, not a country-club restoration," he said, referring to Mr. Harris's program of tax and spending cuts that helped the Conservatives win elections in 1995 and 1999.


"If you want a leader who is a Mike Harris for a new century, I'm your choice. If you want a more polished version of Dalton McGuinty, then Ernie is your choice. In this race, there are two choices. You can choose between Jim Flaherty, somebody who says what he means and means what he says, or Ernie Eves, somebody who is vague and uncertain."



Mr. Flaherty's assertion that only he or Mr. Eves can win the one-member, one-vote election on March 23 is not supported by any opinion polls yet made public.

An SES Research survey released yesterday shows Mr. Eves with the support of 43.3% of decided Ontarians followed by Elizabeth Witmer, the Minister of the Environment, at 21.6%. Tony Clement, the Minister of Health, is at 7.2%, followed by Mr. Flaherty at 6.9% and Chris Stockwell, the Minister of Labour, at 6.2%. Past polls by other firms have shown similar results.

The Deputy Premier's claims, which were immediately refuted by the Eves camp,

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came on the eve of tonight's leadership candidates' debate in Ottawa, where Mr. Flaherty is expected to continue his offensive against Mr. Eves, who retired last year for a lucrative position at an investment bank.

Mr. Flaherty, the architect of the Conservatives' Equity in Education Tax Credit, which provides tuition tax breaks of up to \$3,500 for parents who send their children to private school, said he is concerned Mr. Eves will kill the measure.

"One of the best ways of ensuring that our publicly funded schools provide high-quality education is by allowing competition from flourishing independent schools. But Ernie Eves has waffled on this policy. He is talking about imposing limits on the style and content of curriculum that independent schools can teach so that educational choice for parents would amount to no choice at all."

Bob Runciman, the provincial Minister of Economic Development and Trade and former Ontario co-chair of the Canadian Alliance's 2000 federal campaign, defended Mr. Eves' conservative credentials.

Noting the former treasurer was an early proponent of the Common Sense Revolution who went on to cut taxes 166 times while reducing government expenditures, Mr. Runciman said he was "quite upset" by Mr. Flaherty's comments.

"If you go back to the darkest days of the party from 1987 to 1990 ... Ernie was there with Mike [Harris] and myself and a handful of others in the trenches. No one thought the party would ever get back to government and might not even survive," he said.

"For someone to question his belief ... in the principles of the party, it really bothers someone like myself, who was there with him in those tough times."

Mr. Eves, for his part, dismissed Mr. Flaherty's barbs.

"Desperate people do things in desperate times," he said.

"I don't think anybody should be getting personal in this race. It doesn't serve the party well."

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