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Debate or infomercial?

No clear winner says veteran pollster

By James Wallace

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Local News - QUEEN'S PARK – It was more political infomercial than a war of words but the leaders of Ontario's major political parties stuck to their scripts during last night's televised leadership debate.

With just nine days left until voters choose a new government in this province, none of the leaders took chances and all three hammered away at the core messages they've been delivering throughout the campaign.

"There really was no clear winner," said Nik Nanos, a veteran political observer and president and CEO of polling firm SES.

"It was more a debate about the shade of the colour grey than black or white," Nanos said. "Everyone was on message, scripted and focused on getting their message out."

Strong performances can salvage a losing effort or cement a ride to power.

With Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty holding a commanding lead in opinion poll popularity, Premier Ernie Eves fighting to retain his core support and rebuild the coalition that brought the Tories to power in the past two campaigns and NDP leader Howard Hampton spinning his wheels, this debate was viewed as vital by all the campaigns.

For political campaign teams, the main goal of debate is not, necessarily, to answer questions put to them, or even to win arguments against their opponents.

The main objective is to speak directly to voters to deliver key campaign messages.

McGuinty had several strategic objectives before the debate began;



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to establish himself as the champion for health care and education, reinforce that he won't raise taxes, that he will be fiscally responsible and paint Eves as a divisive leader who has mismanaged the province.

He communicated those messages clearly in the debate.

"Your plan is not working," he told Eves. "It has left us in a mess."

"After eight years of Conservative government we're in last place. We're ten out of ten. We have fewer doctors in hospitals, fewer nurses and fewer hospital beds (than other provinces)."

On his promise to claw back planned tax cuts to seniors and corporations, McGuinty scored again.

"What I'm saying is we have to live within our means," he said. "If I could, I'd throw in a steak dinner and a pony to every boy and girl in Ontario but I think we've got to act responsibly."

Eves also spoke directly to his core audience and was effective in conveying the message that the Conservatives are committed to further tax cuts for individuals and corporations and ensuring Ontario remains economically competitive.

"We've outpaced every other economy in the western world for eight years," Eves said. "Paul Martin gets it but Jean Chretien and Mr. McGuinty don't."

"I will continue to reduce the tax burden on people and on jobs and keep our economies strong."

Hampton successfully managed to attack both McGuinty and Eves but also stuck to the key messages of his campaign, public power and public auto insurance.

"We must keep control of this essential service, we cannot put it in private hands," Hampton said, referring to his promise to stop the privatization of hydro.

On auto insurance, Hampton repeatedly stressed that neither Tory tax cuts nor Liberal promises would help average people much.

"Premiums are up 40 per cent in two years," he said. "People are rightly concerned about that and so am I."

In 1995, the media generally thought Liberal leader Lyn McLeod won the televised debate although later it became clear that voters were hungry for Mike Harris' prescription of tax cuts and reform to welfare, education and other programs.

Polling in this campaign has showed voters are not primarily concerned with taxes, public power, auto insurance or a host of wedge issues the candidates have been peddling.

They are concerned, the polls show, about health care and education, issues such as doctors in rural areas, ambulance service in Niagara region, access to schools.

If that holds true for the rest of the campaign, McGuinty may have gained the most ground during the debate.

He certainly performed better this time around than he did in 1999 against Harris.

"I thought McGuinty looked the most comfortable with himself that I've ever seen," Nanos said.

The Liberal leader appeared relaxed and even joked during the debate and afterwards in scrums with reporters.

Hampton also had a good debate.

"I think he showed up for the campaign for the first time," Nanos said. "He had an effective strategy of taking on both Eves and McGuinty and lumping them together."

Eves was very measured and looked the part of premier.

"He's moving to reinforce his core vote. He spoke primarily to business and was very business-like," Nanos said.

However, with considerable ground to make up in the campaign, he also failed to score the knockout punch some believed he needed.


"Tonight was the night for Ernie Eves to take some risks," Nanos said. "He took no risks on any of the hot button issues including same sex marriages."

With the campaign quickly coming to a close, the debate will likely do little to change the course of this campaign.

"There's only days left realistically for people to make up their minds," Nanos said.

"For all three candidates, what the performances did was reaffirm their core supporters."

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