

PACKET & TIMES

Wednesday, September 24, 2003

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No winner in 'shade of grey' debate

James Wallace

Wednesday, September 24, 2003 - 08:00

Local News - 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 eight 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 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."

Televised leadership debates are generally critical points in election campaigns and 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.

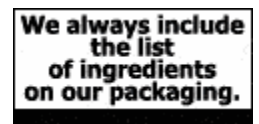


Local News

No winner in 'shade of grey' debate

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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; 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."

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."

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.

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