

Grit grip slips

Windsor stays Liberal red, NDP gains Essex

By Dave Hall, The Windsor Star October 7, 2011

The Windsor region remains a Liberal stronghold, but the New Democratic Party gained a foothold after its first local breakthrough in more than 20 years following a tight Ontario election.

Liberal Finance Minister Dwight Duncan won re-election in Windsor-Tecumseh in an unexpectedly close race against the NDP's Andrew McAvoy while newcomers were elected in the remaining two local ridings.

Liberal Teresa Piruzza will succeed veteran Liberal cabinet minister Sandra Pupatello in Windsor West and the NDP's Taras Natyshak will take over from the late Bruce Crozier in Essex after winning by a comfortable margin over PC candidate Dave Brister.

Duncan campaigned on jobs, saying that the top issues are: "No. 1, jobs, No. 2, jobs, No. 3, jobs."

His emphasis on the economy, as well as the Liberal record and green energy, paid off.

"They said Ontario was not going to vote for green energy," Duncan said in his victory speech. "Tonight, Ontario voted for green energy,"

Natyshak's win was the first by an NDP candidate since 1990 when Wayne Lessard was elected in Tecumseh. Five years later, he lost his seat to Duncan.

"I think it was a very strong showing by the NDP and, combined with the success of the Liberal candidates locally, I think it shows that the Conservative party is not the party people in this region want to have represent them," said Dino Chiodo, president of the Windsor and District Labour Council.

"This election was also about new, good-paying jobs," said Chiodo. "It can't be always about tax cuts. It has to be about employment as well and I think the results show that people feel that's important."

Matt Marchand, chairman of the Windsor-Essex Chamber of Commerce's government relations committee, said the organization is "looking forward to working with the two new elected members of parliament and look forward to developing a strong working relationship with both of them.

"The chamber has felt throughout this campaign that the key issues have been jobs, the economy and energy and we're looking forward to seeing how our elected members deal with those important issues," said Marchand.

In a campaign marked by multiple visits by all three party leaders, missteps by candidates, millions of dollars in pre-election spending by the Liberal government and promises to kill green energy jobs across the region by the Conservatives, voters appear to have been largely satisfied by the status quo.

Recognizing the ridings of Essex and Windsor West as winnable seats in light of the absence of incumbents following the retirement and subsequent death of Crozier and Papatello's decision not to seek re-election, all three leaders made repeated visits to the region.

Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty made two trips and started his final day of campaigning at St. Clair College on Wednesday. NDP Leader Andrea Horwath also made two appearances in the area and engaged in old-style mainstreeting with a walk along Ouellette Avenue. Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak was in the region on two occasions as well.

"It was absolutely a clear sign that the ridings were up for grabs and anyone's game," said Cheryl Collier, an assistant professor in the political science department at the University of Windsor. "When you saw all three leaders in the area right near the end of the campaign, it was a real big indicator that it was deemed worth their time to be here."

But while the campaign was highlighted by visits from all three leaders, it was also marked by gaffes by a variety of candidates.

Brister was forced to change campaign signs after his original signs appeared to indicate he was already an MPP with the words Dave Brister MPP prominent on the sign and the word "for" in small letters.

He later apologized and changed the signs.

NDP candidate Helmi Charif also had to apologize in the final days of the campaign after comments he posted on Facebook last November suggested that Ontario children would face starvation conditions should the Conservatives be elected.

He issued a mea culpa, saying that he was passionate about the plight of the less fortunate, in particular children, and had overstated his concerns.

Hudak also found himself forced to backpedal after parading a group of parents in front of cameras while leaving the impression they were part of a protest group in Amherstburg which had objected to authorities housing a convicted sex offender in a house adjacent to a school.

It turns out they weren't part of the original group and Hudak was forced to acknowledge that fact when members of that group stepped forward and complained about the misrepresentation.

Collier said that such mistakes are most often seized on only by voters who pay close attention to every campaign story but "those are the rarity among voters, generally."

Locally, the campaign was also marked by the absence of PC candidates Todd Branch, Robert de Vertueil and Brister from debates, ostensibly because they had prior commitments or felt the debate forum would be biased against their candidacy.

In the end, it appeared to boil down to the fact that Hudak was unable to articulate his vision for an Ontario led by his Conservative party and voters evidently felt secure in sticking largely with the status quo.

But the campaign didn't start out that way.

In mid-July, Hudak's Tories led McGuinty's Liberals by 11 percentage points in an Ipsos Reid poll, prompting John Wright, senior vice-president of Ipsos, to say "It's Hudak's to lose."

By Sept. 1, that lead had been sliced in half and by Thursday, it had disappeared all together.

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