

It takes one to know one



REX MURPHY

This election is not studded with memorable moments, but there is one that deserves to be framed in memory and grooved in granite. It comes from a person who's not a candidate or, directly, a participant in the federal campaign, but is nevertheless the second most important person in the entire federal Liberal effort.

This is Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty. Mr. McGuinty, well on his way to being the Patron Saint of Turnstiles, threw a dagger into the federal campaign with one of the most accelerated backflips on a campaign promise in the history of Canadian politics.

"I will not raise your taxes," was the McGuinty theme song during the provincial campaign. "I have raised your taxes" was the principal aria of Mr. McGuinty's budget once he was in power. The sun just set on the promise when another rose on its carcass.

Even against the splendid backdrop of Brian Mulroney's one-time opposition to free trade, or of the Liberals now hoary promise to abolish the GST, or, yes, even Pierre Trudeau's bristling deceit on the subject of wage-and-price controls some decades back, Mr. McGuinty's dazzling ambush of his principal campaign pledge is a stand-alone triumph.

Credibility rarely takes a hit of this magnitude. His best promise, his biggest promise: dead within weeks. There's something so thorough about the performance, it's almost admirable.

A broken promise of this eminence is an infection. It is viral. Like all good bacilli, it knows no jurisdictions, and the abstract walls that separate federal from provincial, the Liberal cause nationally from its provincial cousin — these are empty boundaries to its worry force.

The entire federal campaign began with voters' trust in politics and politicians at a nadir. Mr. McGuinty's perfect "10" on the trampoline of electoral duplicity will do nothing to haul it to higher ground.

I don't know if irony has a muse, but if it doesn't, rent Dalton a wig and a toga, and hand him a lyre. For Mr. McGuinty surely is the presiding genius of that edged and cruel rhetorical turn. Allow me to demonstrate.

This was the week that Paul Martin, embattled in a federal campaign yet to find firm purchase, in the hope of fixing his hopes of staying Prime Minister on incontestable ground, reached out to the one great and permanent verity of the Canadian way: health care. Mr. Martin pledged a renewed dedication to the sacrament of medicare, and to stand up to Stephen Harper and his Conservative hordes, who would "Americanize" it, and thereby us. It was a very knightly moment.

The flesh on this pledge was a "commitment" of \$9-billion. If voters were looking for a sign, this was it. The federal Liberals and medicare — they were one and indivisible.

I don't think Mr. Martin is a prevaricator. And when he says that if the Liberals are elected as government there will be \$9-billion for medicare — sponsorship, gun registry, or GST notwithstanding — I believe him. So, in a soft kind of way, I expect, do many others.

People's expectations about Mr. Martin's credibility, however, are not made of chain mail. They are vulnerable to anxiety. Mr. Martin is a federal Liberal, and the turbulence of the past few months from the shenanigans and chicaneries of the sponsorship exercise have left peoples' faith in the federal Liberals a weary and ragged affair.

This is why the federal campaign is, so far, such a slow and sluggish beast.

Mr. Martin braved expectations however. He was willing to face down the skeptics.

He said the federal Liberals were going to help medicare, and he promised a specific amount of money to do so. The promise had not left his hopeful lips when... enter, stage left, holding a banner, comes the Spirit of Electoral Irony — Dalton McGuinty (for it is he). The Spirit, referring to the PM's pledge, speaks: "We've got a campaign promise made in the thick of a campaign."

Well, if you want to know about cake mix you go (or used to) to Betty Crocker, and if you want to know about "campaign" promises, made "in the thick of a campaign" — their durability, their worthiness, their life span and their abandonment — you go to Dalton McGuinty. He is the thermometer of choice for knowing when the turkey's done.

The Premier of Ontario is cautioning people about promises. I guess when you have experience, it is truly a shame to let it rust, not to brighten it with application.

And so, if the electorate need to be reminded of their gullibility, need a refresher course on the art of being taken in by "campaign promises made in the midst of the campaign" by a Liberal, Mr. McGuinty has the role by right of patent, proximity, and flawless execution.

Dalton McGuinty has warned us not to trust Liberal politicians. It's a statue waiting to be carved.

Rex Murphy is a commentator with CBC-TV's The National and host of CBC Radio One's Cross-Country Checkup.



DEBORAH BAIC/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Homa Arjomand: 'We must separate religion from the state... We're living in Canada. We want Canadian secular law.'

Life under sharia, in Canada?



MARGARET WENTE

Homa Arjomand knows what it's like to live under *sharia* law. In Iran, she endured it until someone tipped her off that she was about to be arrested and imprisoned. Many of her activist friends had already been tried and executed. She, her husband and two small children (the youngest was barely one) escaped on a gruelling trip by horseback through the mountains. That was in 1989.

Today, she lives in a suburb northeast of Toronto. Her job is helping immigrant Muslim women in distress. And now she is battling the arrival of *sharia* law in Canada.

"We must separate religion from the state," she says emotionally. "We're living in Canada. We want Canadian secular law."

Sharia law in Canada? Yes. The province of Ontario has authorized the use of *sharia* law in civil arbitrations, if both parties consent. The arbitrations will deal with such matters as property, marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. The arbitrators can be imams, Muslim elders or lawyers. In theory, their decisions aren't supposed to conflict with Canadian civil law. But because there is no third-party oversight, and no duty to report decisions, no outsider will ever know if they do. These decisions can be appealed to the regular courts. But for Muslim women, the pressures to abide by the precepts of *sharia* are overwhelming. To reject *sharia* is, quite simply, to be a bad Muslim.

Ms. Arjomand's cellphone is constantly ringing — with calls of support, or calls

for help, or updates on various crises. A client of hers has just that day died of cancer, leaving behind a nine-year-old daughter. The husband was brutally abusive, and now the dead woman's family is terrified that he's going to take the daughter, who was born in Canada, and go back to Iran. Ms. Arjomand has been trying to get Children's Aid to intervene.

In the burgeoning Muslim communities around Toronto, it's customary to settle family disputes internally, by appealing to an imam or an older person in the family. "I have a client from Pakistan who works for a bank," Ms. Arjomand tells me. "She's educated. She used to give all her money to her husband. She had to beg him for money to buy a cup of coffee. Then she decided to keep \$50 a month for herself, but he said no."

They took the matter to an uncle, who decreed that because the wife had not been obedient, her husband could stop sleeping with her. (This is a traditional penalty for disobedient wives.) He could also acquire a temporary wife to take care of his sexual needs, which he proceeded to do. Now the woman wants a separation. She's fighting for custody of the children, which, according to *sharia*, belong to the father.

The law permitting a *sharia* court was passed in 1991, when Ontario sought to streamline the overloaded court system (and save money) by diverting certain civil cases to arbitration, including arbitration conducted on religious principles. Jewish courts have operated in the province this way for many years. "People can agree to resolve disputes in any way acceptable," said Brendan Crawley, a spokesman for the Ontario attorney-general. "If they decide to resolve disputes using principles of *sharia* and using an imam as an arbitrator, that is perfectly acceptable under the arbitration act."

Promoters of Islamic law in Canada have been working toward this goal for years. Last fall, they created the Islamic

Institute of Civil Justice, which has already chosen arbitrators who have undergone training in *sharia* and Canadian civil law. The driving force behind the court is a lawyer and scholar named Syed Mumtaz Ali, who was quoted last week saying "to be a good Muslim," all Muslims must use these *sharia* courts.

Many Muslims, including many women, are enthusiastic about giving Islamic law an official place in Canada, and they emphatically deny that it will harm women's interests. On the contrary. They insist that under Islam, a woman's rights are protected. "We follow the Islamic law, secure with a perfect sense of equality between the sexes," wrote Khansa Muhaesen and Nabila Haque in a letter to the Toronto Star, where the *sharia* debate has been raging fiercely.

Opponents of the new tribunals argue that the government's imprimatur will give *sharia* law even greater legitimacy. *Sharia* law is based on the Koran, which, according to Muslim belief, provides the divine rules for behaviour. What is called *sharia* varies widely (in Nigeria, for example, it has been invoked to justify death by stoning). The one common denominator is that it is strongly patriarchal.

Alia Hogben is president of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, a pro-faith group with members from every Muslim culture. But the council was never consulted about the new *sharia* courts, and it strongly opposes them. "This is a very difficult position for us to be in because we are believing women," says Ms. Hogben. "But to apply Muslim family law in Canada is not appropriate." In Britain, she adds, the government has flatly rejected councils for *sharia* law.

Both Ms. Hogben and Ms. Arjomand — the former an observant Muslim, the latter not — are lobbying hard for Ontario to change the arbitration law.

(Ms. Arjomand has launched a petition, which you can find through a web search for "International Campaign Against Sha-

ria Courts in Canada.")

When Ms. Hogben's family came to Canada 50 years ago, the Muslim population was tiny. In the 1970s, she and her husband started a tiny mosque in Toronto that they shared with Albanians and Bosnians. Today, Canada's Muslim population numbers more than 600,000, and many Muslims live in self-contained enclaves where there is little interaction with the outside world. Ms. Hogben welcomes the stronger sense of identity among Muslims now. But she warns that many of the new arrivals have brought with them a far more rigid version of Islam. "A lot of money is being poured into North America from very traditional groups from Saudi Arabia and Libya," she points out. These groups are not known for their tolerance of other versions of Islam, or for their progressive attitudes toward women.

Immigrant women are among the most vulnerable people in Canada. Many don't speak English, are poorly educated, and are isolated from the broader culture. They may live here for decades without learning the language, and stay utterly dependent on their families. They have no idea of their rights under Canadian law.

Both Ms. Hogben and Ms. Arjomand say that we are sacrificing these women on the altar of multiculturalism.

"This is an abuse of multiculturalism," says Ms. Hogben. "There is a lack of courage [on the part of governments], and also a fear of offending Muslim sensitivities."

"I chose to come to Canada because of multiculturalism," says Ms. Arjomand, who gave up a career in medical science to work with women who are victims of abuse. "But when I came here, I realized how much damage multiculturalism is doing to women. I'm against it strongly now. It has become a barrier to women's rights."

muenente@globeandmail.ca

Alas for Martin, voters 'are mad as hell' at McGuinty



JEFFREY SIMPSON

The gun registry. The Ontario provincial budget. There's a frustration out there. They don't know where to go," said Duncan Dewar, owner of a fish restaurant in Brockville, Ont.

Valerie Kines, who runs a Second Cup franchise, chimed in: "There's disinterest, and not just among young people. The scandals have had a cumulative effect. So people say, 'Why bother?'"

Retiree Mary Buch agreed: "I spend time in a seniors place. They're disgusted with the lack of integrity."

"People are just fed up," asserted bookstore owner Jake Belanger. Beside him sat farmer and councillor, Eleanor Renaud, who added: "People I've been hearing from are saying 'Why bother?'"

Steve Mazurek, who ran unsuccessfully for the provincial Liberals, seconded that thought: "There's indifference. People are asking, 'What difference can you make?'"

Eight citizens, themselves interested in politics, are gathered around a table in Mr. Mazurek's delightful bakery-cum-restaurant on Brockville's beautiful main street. Their individual concerns ranged

across the treatment of mental health, excessive regulatory burdens on farmers, wasteful energy use. Being largely urban, they didn't reflect the rural reaction — and Leeds-Grenville has large rural areas — against registering guns. Same-sex marriage never came up.

Brockville, population 20,000, is the largest city in Leeds-Grenville, which had the narrowest margin of victory in Ontario in the 2000 election. It tops the Conservative Party's list of ridings to wrestle from the Liberals on June 28.

The rural polls north of the 401 highway voted largely Alliance and Progressive Conservative in 2000; the small cities hugging the St. Lawrence voted Liberal, including Brockville. It had better do so again for Liberal MP Joe Jordan to have a chance for re-election.

Mr. Jordan won Leeds-Grenville by only 55 votes in 2000. The combined Alliance and PC support was more than 7,500 votes higher than Mr. Jordan's total. No wonder Conservative Leader Stephen Harper made Brockville his campaign's first stop.

If the Conservatives can't win here, they're not going anywhere in Ontario. And if they don't go anywhere in Ontario, they're not going anywhere nationally.

Happily for the Conservatives' candidate, Gord Brown from Gananoque — the Alliance candidate in 2000 — they do appear to be going forward in Ontario, which means Leeds-Grenville will be the first Liberal riding to fall.

What's going on out there? The eight good citizens were asked. The bad news

for the Liberals, according to this unscientifically assembled but engaging group, comes in two forms: scandal and the McGuinty budget.

Sandra Lawn, from Prescott, said: "People are mad at McGuinty." Mr. Mazurek went one better: "People are mad as hell at Dalton McGuinty." No one dissented.

Citizens such as themselves are concerned about health care. They think more money should be spent on health care — good news for federal parties that are falling over themselves to promise more. They insist that the new spending bring efficiencies, however. (Echoes of Roy Romanow's commission.)

But they don't like being lied to. And Premier Dalton McGuinty lied. He said he would not raise taxes, but then he did. Anger at one Liberal is being shifted to the next available Liberal target, alas for Paul Martin.

There is some good news for Mr. Martin — news that explains why the Liberal Party has been transformed for public-relations purposes into the Paul Martin Party. Asked which leader would make the best prime minister, five replied Mr. Martin, two liked Jack Layton (although they didn't see him as prime ministerial material; one was undecided.) No one answered Conservative Leader Stephen Harper ("bland," "dull," "not passionate," they said). None of the eight demanded lower taxes, a staple of the Conservative campaign.

If anybody at this table eventually votes Conservative, it won't be because the

Conservatives fired them up, but because the Liberals let them down. Governments, as we know, beat themselves.

Mr. Harper and his candidates talk about scandals, mismanagement and waste with indiscriminate and exaggerated language. They're on to something, however, as they knew from pre-election polling research and focus groups. The message is resonating, or rather is building on messages, received and accepted before the campaign, about the Liberals' corruption.

Ottawa is an hour's drive from Brockville, but for these eight, the capital often seems a million miles away. It's a remote, wasteful government. They're proud of their country and glad they don't live across the river in the United States. They're not so proud of their government.

When prompted, they will agree that a lot of things have gone right in the country in recent years — balanced budgets, staying out of Iraq, reasonable economic growth (although not in Eastern Ontario). Like most Canadians, however, they forget the good and remember the complaints, a political danger for incumbents.

To bring Ottawa closer, Liberal MP Jordan announced \$10-million for "economic renewal" in Leeds-Grenville. The announcement's pre-election timing was as obvious as its political intention. Was anybody impressed? The eight were asked. Silence reigned.

jsimpson@globeandmail.ca