

The 2006 Provincial Election in Nova Scotia

- Lori Turnbull, Dalhousie University¹

Abstract

Rodney MacDonald, the youngest premier in Nova Scotia's history, made an election call on May 13, 2006. He had been the leader of the Progressive Conservative party for only three months, but was certainly no rookie politician. He was elected to the legislature first in 1999 and went on to hold several cabinet portfolios in John Hamm's government, including immigration and tourism. Not quite three years had passed since the last provincial election in 2003, but MacDonald was eager to try to upgrade the PC minority government to a majority and to establish a mandate for himself as leader of the province. When all was said and done exactly one month later, MacDonald ended up with two seats fewer than he had at dissolution. The New Democrats were the clear winners, picking up five seats, while the Liberals slipped by one.¹ The results were no surprise to political pundits and seemed to confirm the durability of Nova Scotia's three-party system. In this brief article, I review the events and issues that defined the 2006 campaign.

1. Nova Scotia Politics, Pre-dissolution

The Conservative government's generosity in April of 2006 was a warning sign that an election call was near. Premier MacDonald traveled the province bringing good news to a whole host of causes, including a pledge of \$6.4 million for research on offshore oil and gas (Canadian Press, ctv.ca, April 28, 2006). The legislature re-opened with a Speech from the Throne on May 4 that promised, among other things, tax cuts and investments in schools, hospitals, roads, and affordable housing (CBC News, cbc.ca, May 5, 2006). A few days later, the Conservatives tabled a balanced budget that was heavy on both taxing and spending, just as the throne speech foretold. It included promises of home-heating rebates, income-tax credits for graduates, more money for hospital beds, and greater assistance for low-income families – in other words, a little something for everyone. The election call came very soon after, leaving opposition parties with no chance to weigh in on the proposed budget (Tutton, globeandmail.com, May 9, 2006). The minority government would have needed the support of at least one opposition party had it intended to put the budget to a vote. There is every reason to expect that it would have passed, given that NDP leader Darrell Dexter was quick to accuse the government of stealing its budget ideas from his party (MacDonald and Tutton, canada.com, May 13, 2006). However, Premier MacDonald was more interested in putting his budget to the voters than to the House. Dexter was probably not too disappointed about this. After all, he was the most experienced of the three party leaders. Francis MacKenzie became leader of the Liberal Party in a convention held in October of 2004. He was without a seat in the legislature, so the election call gave him a chance to fix that problem and to increase his profile in the province.

Though MacDonald's tenure as premier had been short when the writ was dropped, he and the Conservatives had cause to be confident going into the campaign. All things considered, the Hamm government's record was a strong one to run on. For one thing, the economy was performing well thanks to low interest rates and low inflation. The pre-election budget was the province's fifth consecutive balanced budget, all delivered under Conservative leadership

¹ Lori Turnbull, Department of Political Science, Dalhousie University, 6299 South Street, Room 301, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 4H6. lturnbul@Dal.ca

(Canadian Press, *ctv.ca*, May 9, 2006). This was solid campaign material to be sure, but the Conservatives could take only partial credit for these triumphs. The party had held a minority government since 2003, which meant that they had to cooperate with at least one opposition party in order to accomplish anything. For the most part, this was the NDP. The parties' commitment to working together meant that the ideological differences that one might have expected to keep them at odds seemed to disappear over time. NDP leader Darrell Dexter had seen more than one of his party's ideas snapped up by the Conservative party, both as policies and as election promises. All of this made for a productive minority government, but a somewhat undistinguished campaign in 2006, as is explained in the next section.

2. The Campaign Trail

Premier MacDonald's "voter-friendly" budget soon came back to haunt him. One of the very first stumbles on the campaign trail occurred when MacDonald revealed that he was not entirely committed to implementing the budget if re-elected. He told reporters that a post-election budget would be "very similar" to the pre-election one, which raised questions about how seriously his pledges ought to be taken. Around the same time, MacDonald surprised observers by taking a rather abrasive tone against the NDP, with whom his party had been working well. He warned voters that an NDP win would guarantee the "death of the economy," which was more than a bit perplexing to Darrell Dexter, who maintained that his party had been the ones who demanded all along that the Tories' budgets be balanced (Canadian Press, *ctv.ca*, May 15, 2006). The premier's scare tactics did not damage the parties' relationship too much, as both leaders pledged to work together once the election was over, but they indicated his awareness of how close the race was. The NDP have never formed a government in Nova Scotia before, but in 2006 they were the party to beat. Opinion polls suggested a slight lead for the Tories throughout the campaign, with the NDP constantly breathing down their necks. In a poll conducted by Angus Reid in May of 2006, 34% of respondents said that they would vote for the Conservatives, compared with 30% for the NDP. A poll in June indicated that this small gap between the parties had become even narrower, with 38% support for the Conservatives and 36% for the NDP. But what about the Liberals?

Despite their history of success in the province, the Liberals trailed as the third-place party for the entire campaign. A poll conducted in May indicated that 27% of respondents intended to vote Liberal, but this number dropped to 20% in a June poll (Angus Reid Global Monitor, *angus-reid.com*, June 7, 2006). The leader, Francis MacKenzie, was preoccupied with the goal of getting himself a seat in the legislature and, by his own estimation, spent 40% of his time during the campaign fighting his own riding contest in Bedford (CTV News, *ctv.ca*, June 13, 2006a). Of the three parties, the Liberals seemed to have the most trouble communicating their platform and maintaining momentum. The Liberals were the only party to never produce a detailed policy document and, because they did not line up a candidate in Queens, they were the only party without a full slate of candidates.

When it comes to the issues that defined the campaign, it was sometimes difficult to tell the parties apart. The Liberals promised to raise the basic personal tax exemption, provide tuition fee assistance, and take measures to address the mass emigration of youth from the province in search of jobs (Canadian Press, *ctv.ca*, May 18, 2006). They did manage to distinguish themselves as the only party opposed to cutting the provincial portion of tax on home-heating costs. This was a central plank of the campaign platforms of both the PC and the NDP parties. Beyond this, the former promised more hospital beds, more police officers working the streets, smaller class sizes, and an expanded drug program for lower income families. The latter offered something similar again: more nursing home beds, more police officers, shorter wait times, smaller classes, and lower university tuition. The parties' focus on strengthening the police force was, to a large extent, in response to a recent case in which a youth had stolen a car, led police on

a high-speed chase, and killed a woman when he ran through a red light and collided with her vehicle (Canadian Press, ctv.ca, May 23, 2006). The similarities between the PC and NDP platforms, combined with their proven ability to cooperate in the legislature, was both a strength and a liability for Dexter. It seemed as though voters could keep their Conservative government and still get the best of what the NDP had to offer. This meant that Dexter had to come up with a strategy to convince voters that things would improve with him in the Premier's chair. To that end, he pursued an attack on MacDonald's integrity that questioned not the quality of Conservative campaign promises, but whether they could be trusted to deliver them. The NDP released television "attack ads" accusing the Premier of not keeping his promises (CTV News, ctv.ca, June 13, 2006b).

The campaign featured only one televised leaders' debate, held less than two weeks before voters went to the polls. There was no specific "target" amongst the debate's participants; they all took turns taking shots at each other. Dexter and MacKenzie used it as an opportunity to try to force the new premier to identify himself as either a big spender or a penny pincher. Conservative premiers before him have come from both camps. MacDonald responded by defending his party's record of balanced budgets. Even when pressured about the resignation of the economic development minister that winter following a controversial government loan, MacDonald kept his cool. Dexter took heat from the other leaders because the NDP had released a two-year budgetary plan instead of a four-year one. MacKenzie was criticized for refusing to support the home-heating tax rebate, which he insisted was unsatisfactory as an environmental policy because it would not encourage people to conserve energy (CBC News, cbc.ca, June 2, 2006). The debate had no defining moment, few overly heated exchanges, and no clear winner. One person who was not impressed by the debate was provincial Green Party leader Nick Wright. The party ran candidates in all 52 ridings, which is more than can be said for the Liberals, and had attained legal party status the previous month. Even still, they did not qualify as significant political players in the eyes of the debate's organizers. Neither the Chronicle Herald (a local newspaper) nor the CBC would allow Wright to participate. CBC Television regional director Ron Crocker argued that their decision was justified because the Greens had yet to prove their capacity to win votes (CBC News, cbc.ca, May 31, 2006). Exclusion from a major campaign event like a leaders' debate is unlikely to improve the Green Party's fortunes in the province. The status quo might persist for a while to come, especially since the other party leaders have declined to defend the Greens' right to be included.

3. Election Night

After the votes were counted, the Tories had lost two seats but retained their minority status, supported by 39.6% of the popular vote (see Figure 1). The real winners on election night were the NDP, who captured 34.5% of the popular vote and improved their standings in the House significantly. Of the seven seats that changed hands that night, five of them went to the NDP. One of these was Halifax-Citadel, a highly-contested riding located in the province's capital. Always a riding to watch, it has been held by each of the three major parties in the last five years. Before NDP candidate Leonard Preyra claimed it in 2006, it had been left vacant since former Liberal leader Danny Graham resigned in 2005 for personal reasons. This was the riding where Green party leader Nick Wright ran as well and received only a little more than three hundred votes. The NDP tend to do well in the metro area, and 2006 was no exception. They won 13 of 17 seats and almost half the votes. However, they also won two ridings along the province's south shore, Queens and Shelburne (CBC News, cbc.ca, June 13, 2006a). Both were losses for the Tories and indicated that the NDP might be penetrating the governing party's stronghold in the rural regions. It is too early to tell if this marks the beginning of a long-term shift in the province's political landscape.

Figure 1. Provincial election results by party, 2006 and 2003 (by # of seats in legislature)

	2006		2003	
	Seats	% Vote	Seats	% Vote
Progressive Conservatives	23	39.6	25	36.3
New Democrats	20	34.5	15	31.0
Liberals	9	23.4	12	31.5
Greens	0	2.3	0	-
Others and Independnet	0	-	0	1.2

Despite Liberal leader Francis MacKenzie's efforts in Bedford, a plurality opted for Tory candidate Len Goucher, a former city councillor. MacKenzie did not resign as leader that night, but indicated that he was headed in that direction. He had been at the helm for 19 months at that point and would be hard-pressed to continue without a seat in the legislature. With only 23.5% of the popular vote overall, the Liberals won 9 seats, which were distributed roughly evenly between Cape Breton, the metro Halifax area, the Annapolis Valley, and the southwest shore (CBC News, cbc.ca, June 13, 2006b). Their popular vote percentage dropped by 8 points since the 2003 election, making them the only party to become less popular. The 2006 results suggest that the Liberals might be losing their grip on Cape Breton, their traditional support base, as their vote share on the island dropped from around 45% in 2003 to only 30% in 2006 (CBC News, cbc.ca, August 5, 2003).

The Tories led the vote share in every region except metro Halifax, which suggests a solid base of support even though they were unable to secure a majority. Perhaps the most significant casualty for the government was that Kerry Morash, economic development minister, lost the Queens riding to NDP candidate Vicki Conrad - and by only 56 votes. It seems that the Tories have the Liberals to thank for this. As mentioned above, Queens was the riding where the Liberals did not run a candidate. They fumbled the ball by failing to put a signature on the nominee's forms. Lockeport Mayor Darian Huskison had been lined up to carry the party's banner but never got the chance (CBC News, cbc.ca, June 14, 2006).

Less than two weeks after the votes were counted, the premier announced his new cabinet roster. He appointed 18 ministers, only 3 of whom were new to the cabinet table - Mark Parent of Kings North, Karen Casey of Colchester North, and Len Goucher of Bedford (Government of Nova Scotia, June 26, 2006). MacDonald's re-appointment of 15 experienced ministers was a wise move politically, as these ministers provide a link to the previous Hamm government and its accomplishments. In a legislature of only 52 members, an 18-member cabinet is quite large. MacDonald's caucus has only 23 members, so only a handful of them are not invited to cabinet meetings.

4. Conclusion

The 2006 election sealed the Liberals' fate as Nova Scotia's third-place party, at least for the time being. This did not stop them from making their presence known once the legislature returned after the election. Under MacDonald's leadership, party relationships have changed. There is more frequent cooperation between the Conservatives and the Liberals and in the fall sitting in 2006, Liberal members sponsored 8 of the 10 private members' bills that passed.

Francis MacKenzie's resignation following the election meant that the party needed a new leader. In a traditional-style delegated convention held in April of 2007, they chose Stephen MacNeil, an MLA from the Annapolis Valley, over three other candidates. The leadership campaign focused primarily on the party's need to rebuild and regroup after experiencing a slow but steady decline in public support after John Savage's tenure. The next provincial election will serve as an indication of whether they are on the right track.

Both Rodney MacDonald and Darrell Dexter drew election night to a close with vows to continue to cooperate in the House of Assembly. It was their parties' collaboration that had given the previous minority government the stability it needed to last. In fact, they worked so well together that voters seemed unfazed by the prospect of another minority. MacDonald was likely feeling a bit disappointed, though. He called the election in search of a more decisive result for his party, but Dexter and the NDP picked up too much momentum during the campaign to allow it to happen. The premier performed well in the debate and won his own riding handily, but failed to convince enough voters that his party should govern alone. It might have been the case that he was a bit too quick off the mark with an election call and that Nova Scotians needed more time to feel that they could trust him. The election campaign started only three months after the Conservative leadership convention and MacDonald had not been a high-profile politician prior to winning it. As for the NDP, the 2006 election was their best showing ever in Nova Scotia and even though voters returned a Tory minority, the question that lingers is whether they will turn the levers of power to the NDP the next time around.

Endnotes

¹ The party standings at dissolution were as follows: Progressive Conservatives 25, New Democrats 15, and Liberals 10. There was one independent member and one vacant seat.

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