

## The 2007 Provincial Election in Prince Edward Island

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### **Abstract**

*The 2007 provincial election in Prince Edward Island on May 28 was characterized both by a desire for a change and by a defining moment which contributed to the final result. In the end, that inchoate desire for change, coupled with more than a garden variety displeasure with an increasingly tired, sluggish, third term government perceived as lacking energy, imagination and perhaps political will, led to a dramatic turnaround in the election outcome.<sup>1</sup> The Progressive Conservative government of Pat Binns, first elected in 1996, had easily won the preceding election in 2003 with a 23-4 majority. It now saw that outcome exactly reversed, with the Liberals under Robert Ghiz winning 23 of the 27 seats. Even many Liberals were surprised by the extent of the shift.*

### **1. Introduction**

Some election campaigns are over before they begin. The governing party may have such a hold on popular support that defeat is unlikely, or there is little that it can do to counter desire for a change. Then there are those campaign outcomes that result from a defining moment, which inexorably changes their entire direction and momentum.

The 2007 provincial election in Prince Edward Island on May 28 was characterized both by a desire for a change and by a defining moment which contributed to the final result. In the end, that inchoate desire for change, coupled with more than a garden variety displeasure with an increasingly tired, sluggish, third term government perceived as lacking energy, imagination and perhaps political will, led to a dramatic turnaround in the election outcome.<sup>2</sup> The Progressive Conservative government of Pat Binns, first elected in 1996, had easily won the preceding election in 2003 with a 23-4 majority. It now saw that outcome exactly reversed, with the Liberals under Robert Ghiz winning 23 of the 27 seats. Even many Liberals were surprised by the extent of the shift (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

**TABLE 1 - Prince Edward Island Provincial Election Results**

|                                 |                 | <b>2003</b>             |                 | <b>2007</b>             |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
|                                 | <b>Seats(#)</b> | <b>Popular Vote (%)</b> | <b>Seats(#)</b> | <b>Popular Vote (%)</b> |
| <b>Progressive Conservative</b> | 23              | 54.29                   | 4               | 41.4                    |
| <b>Liberal</b>                  | 4               | 42.66                   | 23              | 52.9                    |
| <b>NDP</b>                      | 0               | 3.06                    | 0               | 2.0                     |
| <b>Green</b>                    | N/A             | N/A                     | 0               | 3.0                     |
| <b>Independent</b>              | N/A             | N/A                     | 0               | 0.7                     |

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The defining moment of the 2007 campaign seemed innocuous enough. The government announced a new junior high school in Stratford, a fast-growing bedroom community on the outskirts of Charlottetown. Although there had been an active lobby for the new school, it was not on the school board's list of priorities and no provision had been made in the provincial government's capital budget.<sup>4</sup> The surprise announcement seemed to signal a desperate, last minute attempt on the part of the government to hang on to power, which one letter writer to the *Guardian* described as "brute politics at its worst."<sup>5</sup> To many it seemed the government had panicked, and was making big promises, such as a new convention centre for Charlottetown. Islanders, sensing a crack in the government's heretofore perceived invincibility, quietly began switching their support to the Liberals.<sup>6</sup>

The magnitude of that shift was revealed in a poll commissioned by the *Guardian* newspaper, published at the mid-way point in the campaign.<sup>7</sup> The poll put the Liberal Party at 49 percent, seven points ahead of the Progressive Conservatives. It predicted confidently a massive sea change, and forecast the Liberals would win 18 seats. Although the Progressive Conservatives criticized the publication of the results, rejected its findings and complained about biased coverage from the newspaper, in reality the poll reflected what was already happening on the ground. (The Liberal Party, meanwhile, had a poll of its own carried out after the first week of the campaign which predicted a Liberal majority government. Liberal campaign strategists remained serenely confident during the rest of the campaign.)<sup>8</sup>

The *Guardian* defended the publication of its poll results, citing the public's right to know.<sup>9</sup> The poll appeared to solidify support for the Liberal Party and contributed to its growing momentum.

As one commentator noted, "We will never know to what extent the publication of this poll may have added to Liberal momentum and influenced voting patterns on election day, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, or perhaps, spurred the Conservatives to greater and winning efforts."<sup>10</sup> Another poll - which was not published - was taken the week before election day and showed even stronger support for the Liberals. Islanders, sensing a Liberal victory, were jumping on the bandwagon with the momentum clearly in the direction of a change of government. More than 10 percent of the electorate would switch their votes in 2007.

The Progressive Conservative government was full of confidence going into the election.<sup>11</sup> While a poll conducted in February showed it with just a slender four percentage point lead over the Liberals, the party based much of its confidence on the fact that Premier Binns had consistently out-pollled Robert Ghiz on the question of leadership throughout all of the preceding term.<sup>12</sup> Ghiz, the son of former Premier Joe Ghiz who successfully led the Liberal Party to power between 1986 and 1993, was seen by many in the province as too young and inexperienced to become premier. Since becoming Liberal leader in 2003, his personal approval rating hovered around 30 percent, constantly below that of his party. He also had the perennially difficult challenge common to all opposition leaders of competing against a popular incumbent leader. Binns was personally popular and the rating of his performance as leader had always run ahead of support for his party and that of the opposition leader. Not unnaturally, the PCs made leadership the central campaign issue under the slogan, "Leadership that Works."

The Binns government could also boast of a strong record during its 11 years in office. In 2007, more Islanders than ever before were working, up from 58,000 in 1996 when it came to power to 71,000 in 2007, resulting in the lowest unemployment rate in the province in more than 29 years. Exports had increased over that period by 185 percent, supported by buoyant growth in the province's aerospace sector and increased processing in the primary industries. New initiatives were also showing results in sectors such as information technology, biosciences, alternate energy and

financial services.<sup>13</sup> The opening of the Confederation Bridge a decade earlier signaled a new era of growth and optimism for the traditionally have-not province, and the government could point with some measure of justifiable pride about its accomplishments while in office.

But the government had also incurred its share of criticism.<sup>14</sup> The spectacular failure of the province's leading fish processing company, established with the government's encouragement and financial support, proved to be an ongoing irritant. The government made controversial forays into golf courses, hospitals and several other projects including a decision to locate a repository for the Island's museum collection in the Premier's own riding. In 2006, it also made an unprecedented decision to reject the recommendations of an independent electoral boundaries commission which had undertaken a mandated review of the electoral map. It chose instead to adopt the recommendations of a report commissioned by one of its own backbenchers, leading to allegations of gerrymandering to maintain the support of rural voters.<sup>15</sup> Throughout its term, it had also been hounded over its handling of political discrimination cases which stemmed from its firing of Liberal supporters after it came to power in 1996. The government had also encountered significant criticism from the opposition over its handling of the province's finances, and had lost some credibility about its budget forecasts.<sup>16</sup> As if to underline the growing concern about the handling of the province's finances, the annual property tax bills came out in the middle of the election campaign, prompting concerns about rising assessment values.

The Liberals mounted a strong campaign which reflected growing disillusionment with the government.<sup>17</sup> The slogan, "Islanders first...for a change" resonated with voters in a way it had not in 2003, when the government easily shrugged off criticism. The Liberals kicked off the campaign with spirited attack ads, questioning the use of government credit cards by some cabinet ministers, particularly the provincial treasurer. Although the government said that such tactics had no place in Island politics, and vowed to "stay on the high road," it was clearly caught off guard and appeared to become defensive and dispirited. The Liberals followed up the attack ads with specific policy announcements to cut fuel taxes and to ensure that all Islanders had access to a family doctor.

Ghiz capitalized on the growing unease with the government throughout the campaign, suggesting it was more interested in hanging on to power than it was in providing good government. He declared during a leadership debate among the four party leaders that, "I believe it's time to put policy ahead of politics, to put people ahead of politics." On his part, Binns responded by questioning the Liberal promises to cut taxes while expanding programs, saying, "It just doesn't work that way, leadership is about finding balance. That's what we've been doing for 10 years."<sup>18</sup>

There were few real issues during the election campaign. Although the leaders debated several times during the campaign, no clear winner emerged.<sup>19</sup> A poll suggested that health care was the most important issue among 58 percent of the electorate, well ahead of such other issues as environmental protection, education, job creation, the economy - and leadership.<sup>20</sup> The PCs attempted to make leadership the paramount issue, reflecting the view that many Islanders would not be comfortable with Ghiz as premier. "I think it comes down to, "Can we feel comfortable with Robert Ghiz the way we feel comfortable with Pat Binns?", " said Peter McKenna of the political studies department at the University of Prince Edward Island.<sup>21</sup> For their part, based on their own polling, the Liberals felt the election was theirs to win, and in the words of the *Guardian* editor, Gary MacDougall, were determined that Ghiz not "blow it by acting inexperienced or sounding too brash or shrill."<sup>22</sup> Political columnist Alan Holman contrasted the respective leadership styles of the two major party leaders during the campaign. Binns, he observed, "looked tired and a bit grumpy." The Liberals, on the other hand, "were energized and Robert Ghiz for the first time looked comfortable in his own skin."<sup>23</sup>

Ghiz also attempted to distance himself from the traditional style of patronage politics that has been so characteristic of the Island's political system. Every change of government was associated historically with a massive round of patronage firings and hirings. In the runup to the 2007 election, Ghiz refused to sign the nomination papers of a Liberal candidate who vowed to replace "fat cat" Tory appointees with Liberal supporters.<sup>24</sup> Although every party has vowed to eliminate patronage, Islanders appeared to take Ghiz at his word that he would respect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms on matters related to political belief.

Third parties have never been much of a factor in Prince Edward Island politics, which has the purest two-party system in Canada.<sup>25</sup> Only two candidates who were not Liberal or Progressive Conservative have ever been elected, one an Independent in 1919, the other the New Democratic Party leader in 1996. The 2007 election saw the Green Party participate in its first provincial election, and it nominated candidates in 18 ridings. Green Party leader Sharon Labchuk was able to capitalize on growing concerns about the protection of the Island's fragile environment. The environment had become an important issue during the campaign after province-wide water test results showed increasing nitrate levels in groundwater supplies, due to excessive chemical fertilizer use. A milder-than-normal winter increased awareness about the impacts of climate change.<sup>26</sup> (And, in the narrow confines of the crucible of Island politics, where no issue is too large or too small, debate raged on over the government's controversial decision just before the election was called to allow the sale of canned beer and pop in the province.)

Although the Green Party was new to Island politics, its strong views on the need for environmental protection drew more votes than the NDP, which was only able to field 15 candidates. The NDP leader Dean Constable defended his party's number of candidates, saying it chose to run a select slate focused on fewer ridings. (Constable would later resign the leadership in the fall of 2007.) However, with limited finances and political support, the two minor parties were only able to attract five percent of the total vote.<sup>27</sup> In a novel ending to the Green Party campaign, leader Sharon Labchuk endorsed Ghiz for the premiership.

In the meantime, all political parties were responding to growing demands that they nominate more female candidates.<sup>28</sup> In that, some parties were more successful than others. Nearly one-half of the New Democratic candidates were female, followed by close to 40 percent for the Green Party. Some 22 percent of the Liberal candidates were female, although the number of females running for the PCs dropped to less than 15 percent from the more than 22 percent it had nominated in 2003. In all, nearly three out of every four districts had a female candidate on the ballot. The Prince Edward Island Coalition for Women in Government urged voters to elect more women regardless of the political party they represented.<sup>29</sup> When the votes were counted on election day, 27 percent of the districts would be represented by females.

In a province like Prince Edward Island which is so highly dependent on the federal government, the issue of federal-provincial relations has always loomed large in the political system.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps because of its "have-not" status, the province has always favoured maintaining close ties with Ottawa. That desire to maintain friendly relations with the federal government had resulted in Prince Edward Island predominantly electing governments of the same political stripe as that of the federal government throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, earning the distinction of leading all other provinces in keeping its governments in line with its federal counterpart.

Relations with the federal government were always a part of provincial election campaigns. However, beginning with the election of Joe Ghiz and the Liberal government in 1986 during the height of the popularity of the Mulroney government, and the election of Pat Binns and the PCs in 1996 at the height of the popularity of the Chretien government, that pattern of keeping governments in line appears to be broken. In the increasingly complex and murky work of federal-provincial

relations, Islanders appear confident that whatever political party they elect can work with Ottawa and effectively represent and defend their interests. And while the federal government of Stephen Harper is not popular in Prince Edward Island, federal-provincial relations was not a factor again in 2007, perhaps a sign of the province's increasing political maturity.

While the 2007 provincial election in Prince Edward Island was about the ineffable "time for a change," that was not reflected in the voter turnout. The rate of voter turnout during an election which resulted in a change of government was the lowest in some 40 years.<sup>31</sup> The Island has the highest rate of voter turnout in Canada of usually well over 80 percent, and the turnout rate in 2007 was 83.85 percent (roughly the same as in 2003 when that percentage turned out in the wake of a hurricane to re-elect the Binns government.) Despite the fact that a record number of Islanders turned out to the advance polls - more than 15 percent of the total electorate - the overall turnout rate was well below the 87.6 percent that took place in 1986 when the Liberals defeated the then-PC government, and the 85.5 percent that turned out to replace the Liberal government in 1996.<sup>32</sup>

Of greater impact than the voter turnout, however, is the nature of the electoral system itself. The first-past-the post system in Prince Edward Island in recent years has tended to distort significantly the relationships between the popular vote and the number of seats won by respective political parties. In five of the past six elections in the province, artificial landslides have been produced; in two of those elections, a political party that won 40 percent of the popular vote found itself with only a single seat in the provincial legislature. The first-past-the-post system tends to reward the winning party with a lopsided majority, resulting in a disproportionate number of seats to its share of the popular vote and a weak opposition. Under that system, third parties face an almost insurmountable hurdle. In an attempt to rectify the situation, the provincial government conducted a plebiscite in 2005 which proposed the establishment of a mixed-member proportional system to better reflect the relationship between the popular vote and the number of seats won by each party. The proposal for electoral reform was soundly defeated as Islanders clung stubbornly to the status quo.<sup>33</sup>

In the end, the 2007 provincial election campaign in Prince Edward Island was between a tired and ageing government with its accumulated baggage on the one hand and a political party on the other that had shaped Islanders inchoate yearning and longing into an irresistible desire for change. The PCs, who gambled that leadership was the issue, underestimated the changing political winds.<sup>34</sup> Not even the popular Premier Binns could salvage a victory in such circumstances.

Ironically, Pat Binns had said on coming to power in 1996 that he would stay for only 10 years. His party had convinced him to give it one more try.<sup>35</sup> It was a valiant effort, but one that was doomed to failure. The Progressive Conservatives managed to retain all but one of the seats in its stronghold in the predominantly rural areas east of Charlottetown, where Binns' riding was located. The Liberals swept the rest of the province.<sup>36</sup> A short three months later Binns resigned to accept an appointment as Canada's ambassador to Ireland.<sup>37</sup>

In the end, the 2007 provincial election in Prince Edward Island was all about "time for a change." That, coupled with the momentum the Liberals established from the beginning of the campaign, set the stage for a new Liberal government.<sup>38</sup>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>23</sup>. “The Meddler,” Alan Holman, *Guardian*, May 26, 2007
- <sup>24</sup>. “McGuire severs Liberal ties,” *Guardian*, April 5, 2007
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