

Prospective Premiers Duke it Out on

by Allan Manley

Where were you during the leadership debate?

On Tuesday the 16th the provincial elections leadership debate was held in the new student centre. The debate between Pat Binns, Robert Ghiz and Gary Robichaud, representing the Progressive Conservative, Liberal and New Democrat Party respectively, was moderated by University of Prince Edward Island president Wade MacLauchlan and co-sponsored by UPEI. Student Union as well as Eastlink television and The Guardian newspaper.

Arriving a little over half an hour before game time, Dave Neatby and I decided to wander around and see what kind of trouble we could get into. Deciding not to ait in the Que to get in for a good seat we decided to go upstairs of the student centre and get feel for the leaders by seeing what they were up to. Our first stop entering the student bar from the back door surprisingly turned up no politicians!

Backtracking, we encountered Gary Robichaud and his compatriots relaxing before the debate. The NDP crew allowed us to intrude upon their time, during which we took the opportunity to ask Mr. Robichaud several questions:

What makes you feel that there is hope for a New Democrat government presence in legislature taking into account island political voting history?

Mr. Robichaud explained that he understood



that PEI was not an NDP power base for votes, however, he was quick to point out that the party was respectively very young in comparison to the PC ad liberal parties and that is gaining voter support in every election. The NDP leader also went on to make note that had Ron McKinley 150 less votes and Herb Dickieson an extra 30, the NDP would have been the official opposition of Prince Edward Island.

What would the NDP party do about post-secondary education?

Mr. Robichaud illustrated his parties international and socialist views by not only suggesting a tuition freeze but started to discuss the education systems of Scotland and other European countries where post-secondary education is more subsidized and merit based. This line of thought was cut short as to be honest we really didn't have time to dig into the NDP views of education a few minutes before he was due onstage.

I am a Political

Studies major, graduating this spring, why should I stay on PEI?

Because we need people like you.

All in all, Mr. Robichaud was everything I expected of the NDP. He was kind, Dave and I were guests of the NDP sitting in their reserved front row seating, well spoken and most of all he was sincere that he wanted PEI to hear the New Democrat voice as an alternative.

Following our time with the New Democrats it was time to venture down to the packed house below. It was a spectacle to be seen, with PC party faithful bedecked in party hockey jersey's and wearing face paint that would have easily fit in the movie "Braveheart", the liberals made their presence known with their share of red shirts and liberal bandanas.

Wandering around this zoo I began to truly understand how grassroots provincial politics are on the island. Claiming the front

row seats, courtesy of the NDP which sadly did not fill the other three, Dave and I watched the festivities begin.

Wade MacLauchlan was forced to restart the welcome spiel after he found out he was ahead of schedule and the opening credits were still running. After which he did a good job of playing the role of moderator. His job was made easier by the fact that all the leaders were very good at keeping to their allotted time with very few overlaps....I am not sure if blue haired face painted PC's chanting "Binns Binns Binns" repeated counted towards his time or not, however, I digress.

Taking our seats up front the three political party leaders looked stiff, sombre and a little nervous. Even Binns with his wealth of experience in public speaking avoided eye contact with the other leaders, concentrated on his papers and the audience between comments and barely hinted at a smile. I won't bore you with reciting all of the question and answers

from the debate, however, there are a few that stood out for various reason that I feel are important for the average student to know or just plain amused me.

The first question was reminiscent of silly elementary school questions by the teacher akin to "What do you want to be when you grow up?", the first question posed to set off the 2003 provincial leadership debate was "Why do you want to be or continue to be the premier of Prince Edward Island?". The answers were pretty stock and not really worth going into, however, the question itself just seemed so out of place.

The second question of note involved student debt load and graduate retention. We have all heard what the parties policy on this is, however, I am sure there was more than one student looking for more answers or ideas. This would be a tough question for most candidates, Premier Binns specifically, to justify the rise in tuition by two thirds since he was elected in 1996.