

ON CAMPUS

Decision 2006 Takes Charlottetown Election Campaign to UPEI



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Reporter

UPEI students and other voters got a good look at Charlottetown's federal election candidates last Monday as the four competitors took part in Decision 2006, an all-issues debate, at the W.A. Murphy Student Centre. It was the first and only debate of the campaign for Liberal Shawn Murphy, Conservative Tom DeBlois, New Democrat Brian Pollard, and Green Party candidate David Daughton.

The debate focused on the issues that matter to Islanders, particularly students, and ranged from post-secondary education to clean drinking water. Other issues covered included greenhouse gas emissions, unemployment, the sponsorship scandal, and Liberal attack ads. Obviously, PSE funding was the main issue for students, and Murphy pointed to his track record. "(The Liberals have spent) a lot of money over the last five years (on UPEI), and it's money that I'm proud of."

Pollard shot back, pointing out that "it's not money that goes into the students' pockets. Students have paid more for tuition every year." DeBlois, meanwhile, attacked Murphy's Liberals for cutting billions of dollars in transfer payments to the provinces, limiting their ability to invest in post-secondary education. He promised a tax credit of up to \$500 to help students with textbook costs. Daughton recognized that post-secondary education has essentially become a privilege for upper-class families and said that the Green Party would make the system more accessible for Canadian students.

Murphy was specific about his contributions to UPEI. "When I was

elected in 2000, my #1 priority was the development of this institution... we have accomplished a lot." He spoke of his role in the CARI centre, National Research Council building, an \$18M grant for AVC expansion, and money for the Food Technology Centre. "We've made a lot of improvements, but we're not there yet. There's been a lot of developments that have taken place over the last two years... the flexibility given to the student loan program, the Canada Access Grants, which were available to first year students and now are extended to fourth-year students.

"There is a very, very strong correlation between a strong education system and a strong economy, our environment, our health care system, poverty, these are all very much related. We cannot put these issues into suffering silence."

Pollard started the debate firing on all cylinders with a scathing opening statement directed at the Liberals: "Imagine a political scenario. Cut \$25 billion from health, education and social transfers to provinces. Corporations get a \$10 billion tax break. Stricter qualifications for EI, benefits slashed, and collection period reduced. 250,000 homeless. Construction of affordable housing cut from \$20,000 to \$1000. More than 29,000 family farms gone and a major shift in overseas military action to U.S.-led missions. Hospital waiting times up 90%. College and university tuition tripled. International aid lowered from 0.44 to 0.26 of GDP. Cuts in greenhouse gas emissions promised, but they increase to 24%. Child poverty: 1 in 6 kids poor. Five million Canadians without a family doctor, and more than four billion dollars cut from education funds. Now, I'm not talking about a Conservative

government here, as much as that sounds like Conservative policy. That's the Liberal record."

In typical Island fashion, the debate was a mild one. There was very little blatant mudslinging, and no personal attacks. In fact, the candidates were praising one another at one point. "I certainly would like to commend the others in this campaign... for the conduct that Islanders expect," said DeBlois. "The rest of the country could learn from us."

Murphy didn't get off scot-free for his party's record, though, as both DeBlois and Pollard addressed the sponsorship scandal. "Canadians want to stop the era of entitlement of the Liberal Party of Canada, a party that rewards their friends while the rest of us work hard to make a living," spoke DeBlois. "The era of entitlement for a few is ending. Canadians want change." He also had some words for Murphy himself. "Mr. Murphy tried last May to shut the (Gomery) inquiry down. I'll let him live with that."

The opposition candidates also attacked the Liberals' financial policy. "I know that someone's benefitting from (government surpluses)," said Pollard, "but when I see the misery in this town, the people aren't benefitting one bit."

"Paul Martin speaks of surpluses. Canadians are asking, 'Where is my surplus?'" attacked DeBlois.

Murphy responded by calling the audience's attention to his reputation. "I've worked in this town as a lawyer for 25 years and as an elected politician for five years, and I can tell you: I'm not dishonest and I'm not corrupt... my promise to each and every one of you is to work hard and do my best, and I think I've done that."

There was no "knockout punch" in the debate, but Murphy's remarks came pretty close.

Pollard had some more words for the governing party. "You're watching the dying days of a government that's been in too long they're making stupid mistakes... willy-nilly, stupid policies just so the government can stay in power."

Daughton also joined the act. "Look at the track record... look at their values."

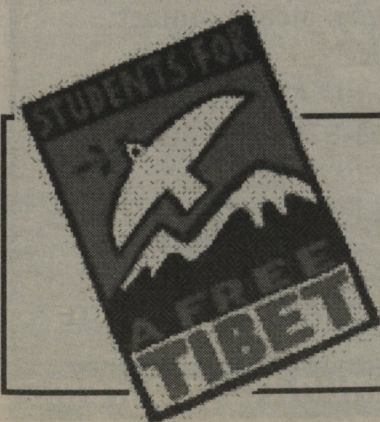
When asked why UPEI students should vote for him, Murphy had little to say. "I'm looking for a strong university... the issues important to all Canadians are those important to students."

DeBlois, meanwhile, talked about his community experience. "I've grown up in this community. My roots are deep here. I have a passionate interest in the well-being of Charlottetown. I want it to continue to flourish and grow. I want to make it an all-around better place to live... any contribution I've made to the community has come back to me in spades. I've found it extremely rewarding and gratifying.

"I bring trust and integrity. I will go forward with your interests in mind and I will not compromise."

The candidates were pleased with the evening. "Debates are an important part of our democratic society, where people get a chance to ask questions and to challenge those who wish to lead," said DeBlois.

Murphy added his thoughts. "Any time I come to an event like this, I always find that I've learned a lot, and I've learned a lot here tonight listening to the people, listening to what they're saying, and I would enjoy the opportunity to continue that dialogue."



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