

The Political Hinterland: The Wily Coyote

by Dave Neatby

My friend Alan and I were tasked to cover the September 16th leaders debate in the Student Centre. In truth, tasked might not be the best choice of words. We jumped at the chance like ravenous coyotes just drooling for a nip at what juicy bits and bones might be left over after Premier Binns, Mr. Ghiz, and Mr. Robichaud were through with each other.

Completely aside from thinking that politics is vitally important to our daily lives, we just like watching the fur fly. What really enticed me to the debate was the chance to see one of the leaders of the political packs furiously gnaw off his own paw after inserting it down his throat.

The blood was in the air. Two rival packs scurried through the halls postering, predicting, and passing out paper. The young Liberals were like crafty foxes. They had staked out all the best spots for posters days before. They wore reddish-orange t-shirts and buttons, sliding unnoticed among the herd of spectators, moving with guile and stealth.

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Big, brash, and impossible to miss, the young Tories were like bears. They wore garish hockey-style jerseys with the names of can-

didates with their matching district numbers printed on the back in Tory blue. The blue face paint and headbands completed the ensemble. They played a constant game of catch-up, looking for anywhere to sitck up the mug of their beloved leader. I swear that if I'd held my breath for long enough, they would have taped one to me.

The NDP was nowhere to be seen.

The debate ended up being very civil. Though my more beastly side was a bit disappointed at the lack of mayhem, I did have a really great time. My highlights of the night were seeing the Premier and Alan squatting on the stage for a friendly post-debate chat, Mr. Ghiz brushing off a CBC crew in favour of an interview with the Cadre, and Gary Robichaud ALL THE FREAKING TIME! The very last thing I expected out of this election was to actually WANT to vote for the NDP. Inconceivable! I didn't even know if I had a Dipper running in my district!

Mr. Robichaud gave us a generous helping of his prep time for the debate. Then he gave us the the front row seats reserved for his supporters (no skin off his back, he only had one official supporter there, either he filled his seats with us or the Tories would swipe them). To top it off, he shone in the debate. I learned three things about Gary Robichaud on Tuesday.

Firstly, he is realistic. He said straight out that his party will not win. They do not aim to win. The NDP want to elect opposition members to congratulate the government when it is right, to criticize when it is not.

Secondly, he has ideas, good ideas. He was not simply swatting at the government's plans, he was proposing alternatives. Sometimes

his alternatives were viable, sometimes he was a little too soft on the numbers, but he's trying to give the people of PEI good government no matter if he sits as Premier or not.

Thirdly, I think I can trust him. I was convinced that he is an honest guy who wants the best for his province and for all of us. I could be naive. I sincerely hope there are public figures that can be trusted.

At the end of the day, the debate made my choice more difficult. Instead of helping me to choose between two options, Mr. Ghiz or Premier Binns, it opened up a third option, Gary Robichaud.

By comparison, the other candidates did not do so well. Though Mr. Ghiz had some good ideas, such as an end to the means test for student loans, I'm not very fond of the way he has conducted his campaign. He said during the debate that he wanted to campaign on issues.

What do "Waving Wednesdays" where candidates stand by PEI roadways and wave to passers-by. This is amateur theatrics. It is not an issues-based campaign. He so often rails against the Binns administration that he neglects to say what he stands for. Is this an oversight or is it Mr. Ghiz's strategy? He also was kind enough to give

me an interview after the debate.

I asked him why he decided to run for office. He replied that he had a passion for public service. He acknowledged that student debt was a problem, but felt that health care was a higher priority than tuition reduction. He felt that his closeness to Ottawa politicians was a benefit and insisted that he would always protect the interests of the Island. If only he was as direct and candid in his campaign as he was during my interview, I might trust him a little more.

As for Premier Binns, my feelings are mixed. I think he is genuinely trying to look out for the interests of Islanders, but he does not always do so in the best way. For example, he has promised to increase the grants made to 3rd and 4th year UPEI students. That is a good thing, but he neglects to mention that UPEI tuition has increased by two thirds since he became Premier in 1996.

To solve the problem of the cost of university, would it not be better to reduce the cost of university itself rather than spending money as an afterthought? It certainly would, but it would also be much more expensive, and the Binns government probably has other priorities. Over the course of the debate, Premier Binns rested on his laurels and swatted the pesky questions of Mrs. Ghiz and Robichaud. Fair enough, he has done a lot for our province, but has he done enough?

At the end of the day, the debate made my choice more difficult. Instead of helping me to choose between two options, Mr. Ghiz or Premier Binns, it opened up a third option, Gary Robichaud. I guess that's what happens in the political forest, it's the canny, quiet, cunning predators that end up with my vote.