

Free vote on faith

Tory might change mind, would let his MPPs loose

By CHRISTINA BLIZZARD

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Progressive Conservative leader John Tory is poised to change the message on his controversial faith-based school funding platform, Sun Media has learned.

According to campaign sources, it is expected today he will announce that if he forms the government, he would put the issue to a free vote in the Legislature, instead of insisting MPPs follow the party line.

Meanwhile, the hot-button issue was front and centre at yesterday's all-candidates debate in Don Valley West. Almost 1,000 people streamed into Leaside High School on a glorious Sunday afternoon to hear Tory slug it out against his rival in that riding, incumbent Kathleen Wynne. She has served as education minister in Dalton McGuinty's cabinet for the past year.

Organized by a local residents' association, the debate was, oddly, sponsored by a real-estate agent and a local funeral home. Which makes you wonder if they were expecting some knock-out punches or drop-dead questions.

First, as many all-candidates meetings tend to be, the hall was packed with mostly partisan people. Some wore buttons supporting Wynne. Others wore T-shirts supporting Tory's funding for faith-based schools. Heck, a few were even sporting Green Party favours in support of their candidate Adrian Walker -- who turned out to be intelligent and articulate and a good foil for the other two candidates.

When an education minister squares off against the guy who pledges funding for religious schools, you can bet the most heated part of the debate will be around that issue. That's just what happened.

Tory pointed out that Wynne, in 2001, is on the record after the 1999 election urging Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty to adopt a policy to fund religious schools.

"You have to ask yourself, when you hear about the funding of these religious schools as threatening our social cohesion in the province of Ontario, why have we not read about that happening in the province of B.C., the province of Alberta, the province of Quebec, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories?" Tory asked.

Wynne insisted that the policy is "divisive," and threatens the social fabric. She even suggested Tory shouldn't have opened it up to debate.

Her answer to the fact that other provinces fund faith schools?

"Ontario is not the Northwest Territories."

Well, I am not quite sure what that means. That we ARE B.C., Alberta and Saskatchewan? Just not the N.W.T.?

Walker says the Green Party proposes to have only one system -- a public one that will not fund the Catholic school system. And while that may sound all very nice and sensible, it is somewhat naive. The political reality is that no politician will ever be able to do away with Catholic schools. They are here to stay and if you want to even the field and make the system less discriminatory, you have to fund other religions.

Frankly, Wynne's answer that the debate about this is "divisive," and therefore we shouldn't be having it, comes perilously close to former Conservative Prime Minister Kim Campbell's assertion that election campaigns are no time to discuss policy.

"This particular policy is one that is very divisive. It's not one that people expected to be talking about," Wynne said.

"They don't want to be having this conversation. They are very angry about it," she said.

Oh, c'mon now. Yes, people are angry about Tory's policy -- and many likely will punish him at the polls because of it. That's what the democratic process is all about. You put out ideas, discuss them and let people decide.

This is a mature democracy and surely during an election campaign you can discuss anything.

Tory is in the fight of his political life right now. While there were many parents with children in faith-based schools at the debate yesterday, the fact is that the policy is costing him votes big time. Some recent polls show the Liberals edging towards a majority government. That would spell the end of Tory's political career.

Now he needs to sell this change of policy to the voters -- big time.

Perhaps that's why they had a funeral home sponsor the debate. Perhaps the Tories need an undertaker to bury their policy.