

# Working Families Coalition meddling spells trouble for Hudak

By Christina Blizzard ,QMI Agency, August 31, 2013

TORONTO - The toughest issue facing Ontario Progressive Conservatives as they head into a policy convention later this month isn't Tim Hudak's leadership.

What they must deal with is the long-term, damaging issue of third party advertising.

The so-called Working Families Coalition (WFC) — a controversial, union-backed group that's funded attack ads targeting every PC leader since Ernie Eves — has put millions of dollars into advertising campaigns since 2003.



Third parties are allowed to raise money without disclosure up to two months before the election writ is dropped.

Since WFC exclusively targets the Tory leader, this effectively doubles the advertising budget of the Liberals at the expense of the Tories. WFC does the dirty work of attack ads while the Liberals take the high road and use their advertising budget for warm, fuzzy ads.

Why don't big corporations throw in money to do the same for the PCs, you ask?

First, the Liberals actually raise more money from big business than do the Tories. And major corporations are careful about public perception.

Most would prefer to give any disposable cash to a charity rather than to a controversial advertising campaign aimed at throwing muck at a prominent politician.

I've written about WFC a great deal, mainly because I find the loophole that allows them to participate in elections to be outrageous and unfair.

It undermines democracy to have a third party meddle in such a way.

I also find it troubling that public sector unions can take such a major role in an election. These same unions — and the teachers are major backers of WFC — will then sit across the table from whoever becomes government.

While the Mike Harris government tried to hold the line on teacher pay and perks, the McGuinty Liberals caved, giving them massive pay hikes until they belatedly tried to hold the line last year.

Tories complained to Elections Ontario about WFC. In a 2011 ruling, chief electoral officer Greg Essena concluded there was no apparent contravention of the Elections Finances Act. The Tories appealed to Divisional Court, the appeal was dismissed and the Tories had to pay \$15,000 in court costs.

Still, since then, Essena has called for stricter rules around third-party advertising in his latest annual report, pointing out that between 2007 to 2011, the amount spent on it tripled to \$6.7 million.

Court documents made public during that case provide an interesting glimpse of just what goes on in the backrooms of politics in the run-up to an election.

There are interesting snippets about how parties go about manipulating public opinion.

Look at the way WFC and the Liberals went about portraying former PC leader John Tory in the 2007 election.

They were having difficulty. He was a Red Tory, so you could hardly portray him as a heartless person with no social conscience.

The Tories launched their own negative ads, attacking the Liberals over a controversial \$1-million grant to a cricket club that had asked for \$150,000.

The ads hit the mark.

In one briefing note to WFC from the polling firm Pollara, a research assistant noted:

“The John Tory ad on the cricket club was very effective among men. The message that came across to the participants was that the Liberals were wasteful with tax dollars. That it demonstrated how corrupt and unaccountable the government is.”

They also found the Tory ad about the Libs’ massive health levy tax hike as being “the largest tax hike in Ontario’s history,” had an impact with women.

It was Tory’s pledge to fund private religious schools, of course, that was his downfall.

“If Tory were to reverse on the policy on funding private religious schools, most of the participants would support him in an instant,” said briefing notes.

So now you know why the Liberals went so hard on that issue. Never mind that they allow “religious accommodation,” in public schools. Never mind that we have an entirely discriminatory school system that funds only Catholic schools. The Liberals knew their only chance to bring down Tory down was to keep hammering at him over school funding.

They even tested voter reaction to him as a businessman — one suspects to paint him as someone in the clutches of big business. It didn’t work.

“It appears to be risky to target negative ads on the issue of John Tory as a businessman,” they found.

Apparently, voters wouldn’t mind having a province that’s run in efficiently — for a change.

Here’s what the Libs discovered was the bottom line:

“When the election is framed in terms of choosing between someone who broke their promises or someone who wants to publicly fund private religious schools, participants chose broken promises.”

Tory, it seems, was just too honest, too businesslike and had way too much integrity for voters to make him premier.

It makes you weep.

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