



Mississauga West MPP Steve Mahoney is hoping to whip the Provincial Liberal Party into shape as its next leader. He gave up the job of Legislative Whip to campaign for the leadership.

By JOHN STEWART
Staff Reporter

When the unofficial race for the Ontario Liberal Party leadership began five months ago, Steven Mahoney was truly a dark horse.

Mahoney was "that other Steve from Mississauga" — the one who hadn't been in the Cabinet — to a lot of Liberals.

But in the months which have followed, Mahoney has worked himself into the thick of the race to replace David Peterson as the next leader of the provincial Grits.

Mahoney figures he's a strong third or weak second in a race which should officially start any day now. The new leader will be selected at the convention early next February, and the Mississauga West MPP believes he has as good a chance as anyone to win it all.

"My father gave Bob Rae his first job," Mahoney tells audiences in his standard stump speech, "and I'm going to give him his last." Mahoney's father was the Canadian Director of the United Steelworkers of America for 35 years and gave Rae a job when he was a struggling young labor lawyer.

If he does win the leadership, Mahoney says it will be due to hard work and straight talk, two things he has relied on throughout a political career that started as a councillor for the City in 1978.

"My campaign slogan is 'Here I am warts and all. How do you like me so far?'" laughs Mahoney who has put thousands of miles of road behind him, criss-crossing

the province in a series of local meetings where the five candidates show off their wares. The others in the running are MPPs Lyn McLeod, who is considered the frontrunner, Greg Sorbara, Charles Bee, David Ramsey and, most recently, Murray Elston.

The rap on Mahoney was that he'd never been a Cabinet Minister and was inexperienced. Those warts Mahoney was referring to include a personal bankruptcy before he entered politics and allegations that developer Marco Muzzo was involved in a sweetheart mortgage deal for his home. Even though Bob Rae, who made the latter allegation, apologized for his error twice in the House the impression of scandal lingers in some quarters.

"I'm fully aware of my own history and I think the public is fed up with that stuff," says Mahoney. He faces the issues

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head-on in his speeches, usually raising them himself. He feels his forthright manner has won over a lot of delegates.

The other candidates seem to feel obliged to defend the record of five years in which the Liberals were in power. "I don't want the status quo in the Liberal party," says the father of three sons. "We were in the wilderness for 42 years and five years later, we let it slip away. The NDP is in power because of us. It's our fault. We've got to get them out before they destroy the province."

The Liberals made a big mistake in sharing power with the NDP for two years and, more importantly, in "trying to outsocialize the socialists" when they got in power. "We piled regulation upon taxation upon regulation," says the Sault Ste. Marie native.

The way to pay for social programs is to generate wealth

in the business community, adds the former Ward 8 councillor. "The NDP wants to protect jobs through legislation. The way you protect jobs is to ensure that a company which opens Monday makes a profit Friday afternoon."

If politicians want to win back respect from the public "we've got to stop with the B.S.," says Mahoney. "We've got to put substantive programs forward and we need a good communicator," says Mahoney.

He thanks Mayor Hazel McCallion, Peel Chairman Frank Bean and other former colleagues for teaching him the importance of consulting and sharing decision-making with the public. The Liberal caucus he became part of in 1987 found out about controversial Sunday shopping legislation an hour-and-a-half before it was announced in the House, says Mahoney incredulously. There were 37 caucus members with municipal experience but none were consulted.

When a man in Timmins asked him how the government could provide more incentives for prospecting in the north, Mahoney told his surprised interrogator he had no idea. "I should be asking you the question because you know more about it," he said. Advisory committees which know the local economy and issues should be set up to make recommendations to government, says the municipal affairs critic. Queen's Park has to stop sending out edicts.

Mahoney has already put together a respected campaign team and has \$100,000 committed of the \$250,000 maximum spending allowed. A new electoral system puts a real premium on organization and a province-wide effort. Local ridings will vote both for leader and for individual delegates who will be committed to one of the candidates. Delegates will be chosen based on the percentage of leadership votes acquired but if you don't have enough of your own delegates, independent delegates will be assigned to represent you. The commitment to a candidate lasts only for one ballot, however.

Mahoney's strength will be in Peel, Halton, and Durham regions but he is already attracting good support in some surprising areas such as Sudbury and Windsor. "The process is wide open," says Mahoney. "It's tailor-made for someone like me who came in as a dark horse. People were wondering if I could put on a credible campaign," he adds. "Now they're saying they this guy could win."