

Hanging Ernie Eves

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Ernie Eves's portrait

Finally, after almost a decade of waiting, Ernie Eves has had his portrait hung at Queen's Park.

It's one of those traditions at Queen's Park where everybody is supposed to put his or her knives away and a spirit of non-partisanship fills the air.

For example, Premier Dalton McGuinty saw Mike Harris in the audience and warmly recognized him, despite the fact the two were bitter foes from 1996-2002, when Harris was premier, and McGuinty opposition leader.

And then there's Ernie Eves, Ontario's 23rd premier, who never quite learned how to play by those informal rules.

Eves was at the Ontario Legislature last week, nearly 10 years after leaving the premier's office, to have his portrait unveiled and officially hung, as tradition dictates. And he used the occasion to roast nearly everyone sight.

Eves replaced Harris as Ontario PC leader, but before that, he was a loyal second-in-command as

Harris' finance minister. That didn't stop him from taking a friendly shot at his former boss, who at various times over the past decade, has worked at the same law firm as other ex-premiers David Peterson and Bob Rae.

"For a guy who cursed Liberals at virtually every cabinet meeting we attended, it sure is strange to see who his law partners have been," Eves cracked.

Then, after listening to a generous introduction from the current premier, and with the current opposition leader (Tim Hudak) in the audience, Eves continued to let 'er rip.

"That last budget that was brought in was one of the most tepid I've ever seen," he started, with McGuinty sitting three feet away from him. "Then my party voted against it without even reading it. And the NDP didn't even show up to vote for it even though they negotiated 'improvements' to it. Things sure have changed since I left here."

Lots of nervous laughter and people staring at their shoes after that one.

He took a long walk down memory lane, including sharing a story about attending former U.S. President Gerald Ford's annual golf tournament. "And I paid my own way to get there," Eves clarified. "We didn't fly down in any orange helicopters." Another zinger, and suddenly the smile was completely gone from Dalton McGuinty's face.

But all jokes aside, Eves did remind the audience that even though his tenure as premier was short (April 2002 to October 2003), his government did face some challenges of epic proportions.

SARS (which killed 44 people), Ontario's first case of Mad Cow Disease, and the worst electricity blackout in history all happened on Eves' watch. Also, the province's finances were in desperate condition when Eves was finance minister. "And yet, Mike Harris trusted me to get the job done. He also knew I didn't want his job. Not every first minister and finance minister can say that," he added, with a not so thinly veiled reference to Jean Chretien and Paul Martin.

Eves met Queen Elizabeth II three times and cherished every get together. He met Pope John Paul II and was told he could bring 12 others to the meeting. Despite intense lobbying from numerous Tory backroom donors, Eves says he told his social services minister to find 12 underprivileged children who would enjoy the visit. He says he took a lot of flack for that decision, but it was the right one.

Eves' time in public life, which started with a six-vote victory in 1981 in Parry Sound-Muskoka, will always be remembered for the time when he got the news of the tragic death of his son Justin, who perished in a car crash.

Justin was learning disabled, so Eves created a foundation in his son's name, to raise funds for other learning disabled kids.

Eventually, the key moment arrived when artist Bernard Poulin's work would be unveiled. Every former premier's portrait tells something important about the office holder. Bob Rae was captured with a laptop computer open on his desk, to remind everyone that Ontario moved into the digital age under his watch. David Peterson was the first premier ever painted without a jacket on, his tie loosened, to indicate his more casual style, and the end of a stolid, 42-year Tory dynasty. The background in William Davis' portrait shows beautiful Georgian Bay, where Ontario's 18th premier could get away from the stresses of the job at his cottage.

Ernie Eves' portrait shows him in the chamber of the legislature itself, where he said he always enjoyed the cut and thrust of question period. There are 10 documents on his desk with him, each reflecting an important moment in his political life.

While Eves admitted "getting hung in front of 300 people isn't my idea of a good time," leave it to the current premier to sum up the reality of the job.

"Every day, I walk out of my office and see portraits of my predecessors," Dalton McGuinty said. "And it's a constant reminder that we'll all be hanged some day."