

SPEC VOTES



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Ontario Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne calls herself “a consummate extrovert” who loves people and gets energized taking part in campaign events.

Wynne strives to stay connected

Those closest to the Liberal leader describe her as someone who consults colleagues, works for consensus

MEREDITH MACLEOD
The Hamilton Spectator

This campaign day lasts more than 14 hours. Photo ops, speeches, meeting local candidates, rallies, briefs and debriefs, all surrounded by hours on a bus rumbling 315 kilometres between Scarborough, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Oakville and back to Queen's Park.

Some days are much longer. But no matter her schedule, Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne, 61, does two things each day. Her early-morning runs are a feature in party ads. The other habit is invisible and private.

Each night Wynne calls her parents, John Wynne, 88, and Patsy O'Day, 86, at the Richmond Hill home in which she grew up.

“Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night and I'll think something is going to happen to one of them, you know, and it's frightening,” Wynne says during a quick phone interview while en route to a rally in Oakville.

“(It's) frightening because I don't want, I don't want them to feel that I, that I sort of abandoned them, you know.”

She has heard both Bob Rae and Dalton McGuinty talk about calling their mothers. At first she didn't think she could do it.

“And then when I got into this job I remembered that and I thought, if I don't call my parents every day then I'm going to lose touch, you know.”

The pace of life in the top post at Queen's Park and on the campaign means all family interactions have to be “intentional,” says Wynne, who has a son and two daughters and is grandmother to two girls and a boy.

Wynne makes it a rule to see her grandkids at least every two weeks. It's time for a visit.

Just that day, campaign day No. 23 of 36, she's talked to her daughter Jessie, who finds it hard to bear the swipes taken at her mother.

Thankfully, Jessie's three kids are too young to take it in, says Wynne. Instead, Claire, 2½, looks at the morning paper and kisses her grandmother's picture on the front page.

This is a busy day on the campaign trail. Wynne's team is scrambling over a report of a secret deal to buy property from the MaRS real estate project in Toronto. There's also the fresh news that the Liberals have fallen behind the PCs in a new poll.

After photo ops of the premier peeling asparagus with culinary students in Scarborough, Wynne wastes no time going on the offensive. She warns that PC Leader Tim Hudak will jeopardize the education of 260,000 students who qualify for the province's 30 per cent tuition grant, and mocks his million jobs plan.

As Wynne speaks, her partner Jane Rounthwaite stands nearby, as she has at each stop.

“Kathleen could have listened to some backward political advisers who urged her to have Jane stay at home but that's not who she is,” said friend and Toronto councillor Shelley Carroll.

“That's not who they are. They are in this together.”

They've always campaigned together, with Rounthwaite, a management consultant, active in orchestrating early attempts at public office. This is their first province-wide campaign and Rounthwaite is not an organizer but rather front and centre, shaking hands and supporting her spouse.



Ontario Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne's daily runs have been featured in her campaign ads.

She says she is always amazed by Wynne's love for meeting people.

“I'm not sure by the 55th person in a day that I would have the emotional wherewithal to be as effusive, enthusiastic or, frankly, as interested,” she said during a phone interview from the couple's Toronto home.

Even among non-supporters, Wynne finds a way to connect with people, says Rounthwaite, who recalls just a handful of negative experiences at thousands of doors over the years of canvassing.

Wynne, slender, ever-smiling and looking as much the kindly, bookish teacher as the political powerhouse, made an early career in mediation. She stayed home to raise her children and became political through fighting amalgamation and cuts to education.

Homophobia has reared its head from time to time, says Rounthwaite, who married Wynne in 2005. The two met at Queen's University in the early '70s.

They maintained a friendship while Wynne married and had three children. When the marriage fell apart, the women began a relationship and in 1991, moved in together.

Wynne's husband Phil Cowperthwaite moved into the basement for a time before buying a house with a connecting yard so both parents saw the kids each day.

Wynne has said she lost some friends when she came out at 37 and when seeking a school board seat for the first time in 1994, Wynne was branded an “extremist lesbian” by detractors. She lost.

But for Rounthwaite, encountering prejudice “pales in comparison” with allegations of corruption now being levelled against Wynne by both NDP Leader Andrea Horwath and Hudak.

While Rounthwaite is confident the strategy will backfire, the accusations are “painful,” she says, because Wynne has a strong moral compass.

“She sees and feels the right path. She cannot be drawn off from doing the right thing and she'll always do the right thing over her own self interests or those of people nearest to her,” said Rounthwaite.

Hamilton area MPP Ted McMeekin met Wynne each week over a bowl of soup while he served as her parliamentary assistant when she was minister of education. He wasn't used to that level of input. Many ministers weren't “too interested in hearing from their parliamentary assistants,” said

KATHLEEN WYNNE

Born: May 21, 1953, Richmond Hill, oldest of four girls

Education: Bachelor of Arts (Queen's), Master of Arts in linguistics (University of Toronto), Master of Education in adult education (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education)

First elected: Toronto public school trustee in 2000; Ontario legislature in 2003; party leader by delegates Jan. 26, 2013; became premier Feb. 11, 2013.

Political defeats: Failed to win Ward 12 seat to public school board in 1994; lost bid to be chair of school board in 2001.

Cabinet posts: Minister of education in 2006-2010; minister of transportation 2010-2011; minister of municipal affairs and housing and aboriginal affairs 2011-2013.

Major political challenges: Took on then PC party leader John Tory in the 2007 provincial election in her riding of Don Valley West. Some urged her to run in a different riding but she refused and handily won.

McMeekin.

“Kathleen understood there were MPP backbenchers with talents and gifts. She brings out the best in people. I thought the world of her.”

McMeekin says Wynne is the most thoughtful, collaborative leader he has worked for in his 24-year political career. McGuinty often made decisions, “quite independent of feedback he got” from cabinet ministers, said the MPP for Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdate.

“Kathleen Wynne would never do that. She consults and works for consensus.”

But that doesn't make her a pushover, he says. She can't be intimidated and has confidence in her own abilities.

Carroll, a longtime friend, believes Wynne would be a different premier than she has been if directly elected to the post.

“I think she believes she has to be elected by Ontario to go to the next level of her leadership.”

Carroll and Wynne were among a group of activist Toronto parents from then separate municipalities chosen to meet with education officials in the newly elected Mike Harris regime in 1995.

“Kathleen came over at the end of the meeting and said, ‘If they're going to amalgamate us against our will, we need to amal-

THE LEADER PROFILES

Yesterday: Andrea Horwath, NDP

Today: Kathleen Wynne, Liberal

Tomorrow: Tim Hudak, PC

gamate our activism.”

The parents started meeting in Wynne's home in the affluent Lawrence Park neighbourhood. She was the clear leader, says Carroll, action-oriented, focused and organized, but everyone always had an equal say.

“She has a real gift for bringing people together. There were two group norms during those meetings in Kath's living room. The opposite of listening is waiting to speak. If you got caught doing that you would be called on it. ... The other group norm was you were not allowed to enter the room moaning about how busy you were.”

Wynne recalls her “mother bear” instincts kicking in during that time of her life. She began pondering a run for the local school board to protect her kids' education.

“And I can remember the feeling of thinking I want to be involved in the politics around this. I remember I was, I don't know, 31 years old or something and I can remember thinking as my kids get older, whatever work I'm doing, I want to be involved in local politics because I care about this so deeply.”

Wynne speaks tenderly of the roles her parents and paternal grandparents played in her upbringing and, asked how she hopes her grandkids will reflect on her a generation from now, she's thoughtful.

“I hope they say, as I say about my grandmother, that she was inspirational to me. She was a place, she was a person that I could go to and I could talk to in a very different way than my own parents — as grandparents are, right? So I hope they think of me, first of all, as a loving presence in their lives and then secondly as someone who at least tried her best to make a difference.”

Just a few minutes later, Wynne bounds off her red and white bus into a crowd of Liberal supporters in Oakville. At five-foot-four, she is dwarfed by the firefighters in bright yellow T-shirts dominating the crowd. She launches a hug with one of them standing just outside the bus.

Wynne's then hugging everyone, while handlers are trying to hasten her arrival inside to deliver remarks.

Her staff remark about her tirelessness and ability to jam event after event into a day, but Wynne says it all invigorates her.

“I think I am a consummate extrovert. I love people. I mean I can be feeling tired and the end of my energy for the day, and then I go to a rally or when I was doing riding campaigns, I'd go out for a canvass and then I'd come back feeling like a million bucks,” she said.

Rounthwaite says the schedule Wynne keeps is a constant struggle for their home life, though when she thinks things are getting out of hand, she'll call Wynne's staff.

“I say, ‘I don't want to be the spouse from hell but we've got to do something. She hasn't had a day off in three weeks.’”

But Rounthwaite says she fully backs her partner's political ambitions, unlike some spouses who secretly, or not so secretly, hope for defeat on election night for the sake of the family.

“I'm a willing participant in it. I want her to win and I want her to win big.”

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