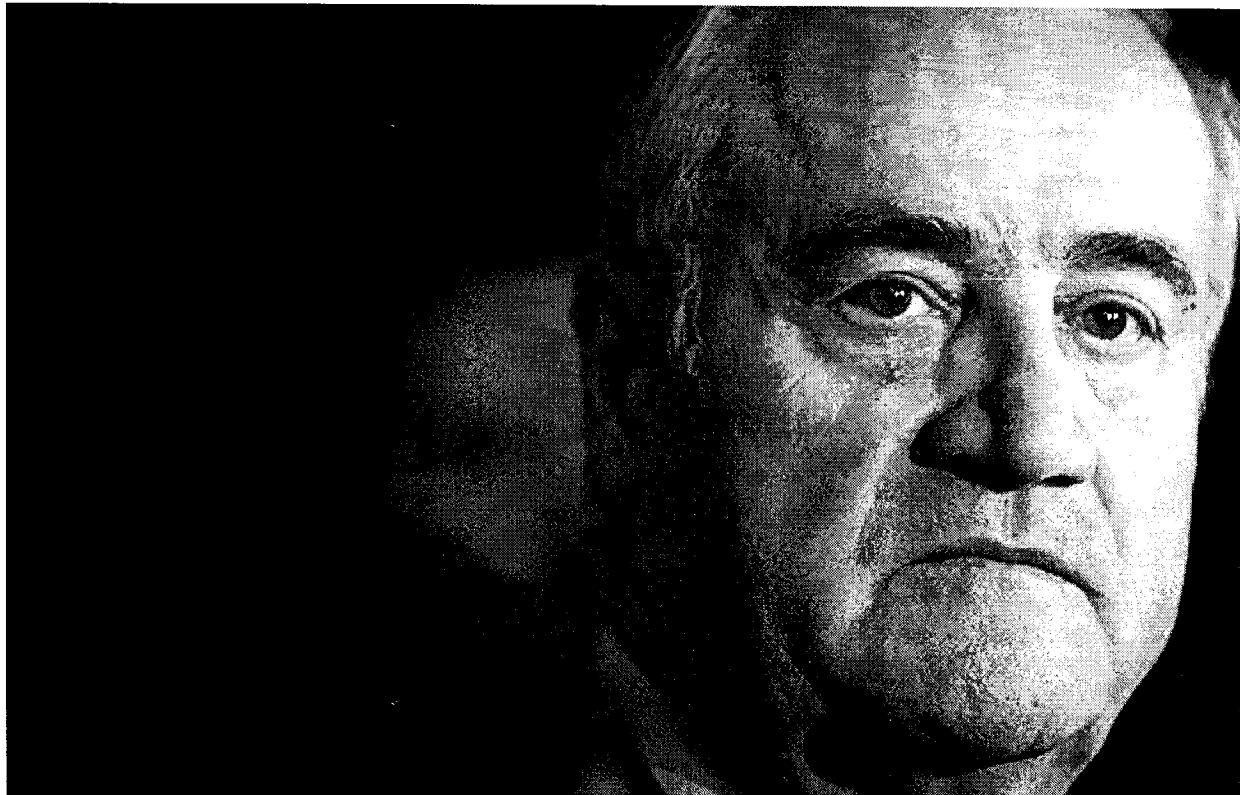


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Toronto-area byelection pivotal battle for major parties

BY LINDA NGUYEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS NOVEMBER 19, 2010 8:27 PM



Former OPP commissioner Julian Fantino speaks to members of the media following a press conference at the Famee Furlane Club in Vaughan, Ontario, Tuesday morning, October 12, 2010. Fantino called the conference to announce that he will run as a Conservative candidate in an upcoming federal byelection in Vaughan.

Photograph by: Aaron Lynett, National Post

VAUGHAN, Ont. — As byelections sometimes do, the battle for Vaughan, north of Toronto, could deliver a blow to the federal Conservatives, who are running a marquee candidate in a bid to snatch the riding from the Liberals. Or it could signal the beginning of the end of the Grit stranglehold on seats in the Greater Toronto Area.

The Nov. 29 vote, one of three byelections that day (the other two are in Manitoba), pits high-profile, first-time Tory candidate Julian Fantino against Tony Genco, running for the Liberals who have held the riding for more than 20 years.

The NDP is fielding first-timer Kevin Bordian.

If Fantino, the 68-year-old former OPP commissioner, wins "it would be a feather in the cap of the Conservatives," said Nelson Wiseman, an associate politics professor at the

University of Toronto. "They have been picking up byelections and they think they have an excellent chance here."

Fantino, whose 42-year career in law enforcement included stints as the police chief for both York Region, which includes Vaughan, and Toronto, is an outspoken champion of public safety and hard-headed leader.

He's been embroiled in many controversial decisions, most notably the tense land dispute in Caledonia.

Fantino has also lived in Vaughan for nearly three decades and is well-known in the predominantly Italian-Canadian suburb for his community work.

Despite the Fantino campaign, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff sees the upcoming byelection as an opportunity to give the Harper government a wake-up call.

"Byelections are always important tests of opinions," Ignatieff told a crowd of hundreds at a local Liberal rally earlier this month. "This gives a chance for a great community to say that this (Conservative) government is on the wrong track, that this government has misspent public money and that this government does not have the right priorities."

The Liberals hope Genco, also a well-known figure in the community, can keep the riding in Liberal hands.

Genco was the president and CEO of the former military base, Downsview Park, and responsible for the Toronto visits of Pope John Paul II in 2002 and the Rolling Stones for the SARS benefit concert in 2003. He also sits on a number of local boards, including the committee that is bringing a hospital to Vaughan — one of the more contentious issues in this riding.

Liberal Maurizio Bevilacqua held the seat for 22 years until he stepped down in August to become Vaughan mayor.

Despite having six other candidates on the ballot, political watchers say the race will most likely be a tight contest between Fantino and Genco.

"Vaughan has been a long-held Liberal riding but on the other hand, it is in an area that is volatile," said Bob Drummond, a politics professor at York University in north Toronto. "It goes back and forth at the provincial level and is not by any means a safe seat federally."

Ignatieff admitted at the rally Genco's win would prove "significant" for the party.

"We don't take anything for granted," he said. "We have to earn every single vote. Every single one. We have to work hard, work with determination . . . All our people have to be out fighting to win this seat."

In the 2008 election, the Tories doubled the number of seats they had in the "905 belt" around Toronto to 10, but failed to make any inroads in the City of Toronto, which has long voted Liberal.

The Liberals won 32 seats and the NDP two.

Vote numbers for the Liberals have also fallen steadily over the years in the working-class riding of Vaughan. In the 2008 campaign, the Grits captured 49 per cent of the votes, down from 63 per cent in 2004. The Conservative candidate got 34 per cent.

Fantino said he couldn't say no to running when Prime Minister Stephen Harper came calling.

"The feeling I get is that people are ready for change," said Fantino in a rare interview with Postmedia News last week. "They want change, but they also want good quality leadership. So it isn't change for the sake of change."

Fantino, who retired from the OPP in June, said he wasn't ready to devote his life to golf, a game he doesn't even like playing.

"I will be forever concerned and conscientious about that (crime)," he said, adding that the issue is more important now that he is a grandfather of four. "It's a huge issue. Any crime is unacceptable and I shudder when I hear people talking about or minimizing the impact of crime. For me as a statement, unequivocally in this regard, any crime is unacceptable."

Fantino also admits he "may not have pleased everyone all the time" during his policing career.

Last January, a criminal charge of attempting to influence municipal officials in relation to the Caledonia dispute was dropped.

The complainant, resident Gary McHale, had accused Fantino of unfairly targeting whites during the standoff and turning a blind eye to the native occupation. He has since started a Conservatives' group called Against Fantino and has launched a campaign to distribute 60,000 flyers and to hold a protest every weekend until the byelection.

Since entering the race in mid-October, the usually outspoken Fantino has kept a low profile in what critics describe as a peek-a-boo campaign. Fantino has done a handful of

tightly controlled photo ops in Vaughan that have been quietly publicized, and then only to local media.

Nonetheless, Genco said Fantino is not only "playing for the wrong team," but lacks the politician experience to hold his own in Ottawa.

"This is the beginning of the end for the Harper government," he said, following a morning of canvassing at a Vaughan retirement home. "It will demonstrate to the Harper Conservatives that we've had enough of their priorities. They're not the priorities of the GTA and not the priorities of Canadians."

Genco, 46, worked for years behind the scenes with ex-cabinet minister Art Eggleton and as an assistant to now Ontario MPP Greg Sorbora.

"I understand the culture of Ottawa and how to get things done," said Genco, who moved to Vaughan in 1997 with his wife and two children. "There's no on-the-job training for me."

Genco said one of the main concerns in this riding is transportation and making government services more accessible.

"This is not about Julian Fantino. Frankly, it's not about Tony Genco," he said. "It's about what kind of government you want to see."

Two Manitoba byelections will also be held on Nov. 29. The Dauphin-Swan River Marquette riding is expected to be a shoo-in for the Conservatives and Winnipeg North is predicted to go to the NDP.

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