

New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal

Greenie's shtick falls flat; Audience shouts down candidate for body bag crack at debate

Friday, January 13, 2006
Page: B3
Section: News
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Green Party candidate Erik Millett had stolen the show at Thursday night's New Brunswick Southwest candidates' debate in St. Stephen.

The crowd bought his nuke protester get-up complete with white jump suit and gas mask and even Conservative candidate Greg Thompson said his sense of humour was worth the admission - free.

He had them until the very last second of his closing comments.

When Mr. Millett criticized Stephen Harper's support for the war in Iraq by handing Mr. Thompson a list of potential jobs his kids could get in Iraq and a box of garbage bags, he said, for their body parts, the crowd turned.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," one person shouted over a loud chorus of boos.

"Sit down," someone else shouted.

Mr. Thompson did a slow burn.

The audience reaction to the display was even louder than it was when Liberal candidate Stan Smith earned unintentional belly laughs in his opening remarks.

He suggested that Mr. Thompson not only shouldn't be re-elected, that he should resign.

Mr. Smith suggested Mr. Thompson has been misleading during the debate about proposed liquefied natural gas projects on the Maine side of Passamaquoddy Bay.

Mr. Thompson has been a leading critic of the proposals and has called on the prime minister to kill the LNG projects by denying gas tankers access to the Canadian channel leading into the bay.

Mr. Smith said the prime minister can't stop the LNG projects.

"Mr. Thompson should resign his seat in parliament," Mr. Smith said as the crowd cracked up. "It's the honourable thing to do."

Mr. Thompson, the MP in the last Parliament, fired back when he said Pierre Trudeau said no to oil tankers in Passamaquoddy Bay 30 years ago and that Ottawa can do the same thing with LNG today.

Mr. Millett said he doesn't trust the Conservatives to stand up to the U.S. on the LNG issue, calling Mr. Harper, "George Bush's best buddy in the West."

NDP candidate Andrew Graham said he'd fight the LNG developers "tooth and nail."

Mr. Thompson also jabbed at the scandals that have plagued the Paul Martin Liberals.

"Every rule in the book has been broken," he said.

Mr. Thompson also earned applause when he said a Conservative government would repeal the gun registry.

"The long gun registry is not working. We will eliminate it," he said.

After his opening shot at Mr. Thompson, Mr. Smith turned gentler and referred repeatedly to his record as the long-time mayor of St. George.

Mr. Graham didn't go on the offensive during the debate and cited families, health care and social justice as key concerns.

He was also self-effacing at times, like when he tried to remember a quote and said, "My mind is like a steel trap but sometimes I forget to set the trap."

Until his last-second fumble, Mr. Millett had put in a polished and charismatic performance and earned applause when he said marijuana should be legalized and taxed.

"Get it out of the hands of organized crime," he said.

He opened the debate in his mock hazardous material suit, plastered with radioactive warnings and told the crowd he was against the Point Lepreau refurbishment.

"What the hell are we doing with a nuclear power plant in our backyard?" he asked.

A question about election promises and where all the money to fund them is coming from offered the candidates some cannon fodder.

"I suspect it's in an ATM machine; a really big one," Mr. Millett said.

Mr. Thompson liked that one.

"Erik, your performance made the price of admission acceptable," he said.

That was before the body bag remark.

After turning the crowd against him with his Iraq comments, Mr. Millett barely got out one last sentence.

"It's not easy being green."

Another debate is scheduled for Monday at 7 p.m. at the Fairmont Algonquin in St. Andrews.

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