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HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA | Friday June

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

" People from a planet without flowers would think we must be

Winner debatable

MacDonald wants to move forward, but takes a beating from Dexter, MacKenzie for party's past
By DAVID JACKSON and AMY SMITH Provincial Reporters

Liberal Leader Francis MacKenzie was in the middle of Thursday's night televised leaders debate, but his two opponents tried to keep him on the outside.

NDP Leader Darrell Dexter and Conservative Leader Rodney MacDonald focused much of their energy on each other rather than on the Grit, who drew the centre podium for the event sponsored by the CBC and The Chronicle Herald.

"Clearly they are trying to show Nova Scotians they are not one and the same," Mr. MacKenzie told reporters afterward.

Mr. Dexter struck first, asking Mr. MacDonald about the politics behind the industrial expansion fund and why Cumberland North candidate Ernie Fage resigned as economic development minister after a loan approved in

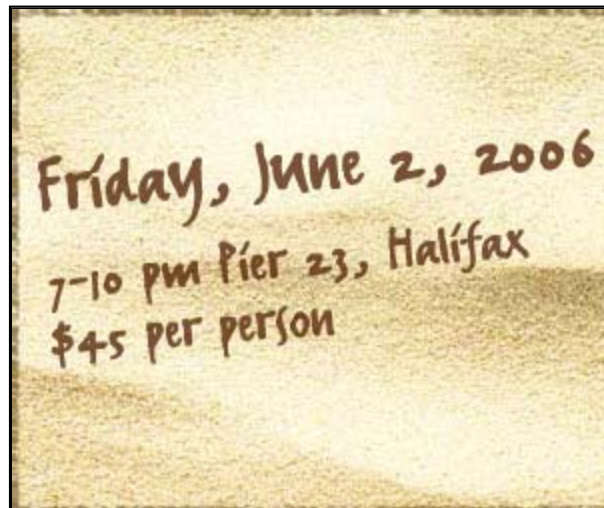
He said Nova Scotians deserve to know exactly why Mr. Fage quit, but the premier didn't

"I'm focused on the future, not talking about the past," Mr. MacDonald said.

When Mr. Dexter tried to ask the question again later in the debate, Mr. MacKenzie interjected and think we may be actually moving Mr. MacDonald a little bit back to the centre from the left. He went on to talk about the necessity of an economic development plan.

Mr. MacDonald, who became Tory leader in February, and his ministers spent millions in t

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Makeup artist Annema puts some final touche Premier Rodney MacDonald before a televised debate Thursday night. (Eric V Staff)



Premier Rodney MacDonald and Liberal Leader Francis MacKenzie chat before a live television chat Thursday night. (Eric V Staff)

mad with joy the whole time to have such things about us. "

Iris Murdoch

the election this spring, tabling a budget with \$399 million in extra spending and introducing an election platform that tops \$1 billion.

The Conservative leader was asked which former Tory premier he is more like, John Hamlin or James Buchanan.

"I learned my politics from John Hamm," Mr. MacDonald said of the premier who oversaw the province's first balanced budgets in 40 years.

But Mr. MacKenzie, who claims his party's \$1.6-billion platform is the cheapest of the three, thinks Mr. MacDonald has "his Johns mixed up."

"I believe that Mr. MacDonald quite enjoys spending money," the Liberal said.

Mr. MacDonald, who repeatedly said he was proud of the Conservative record, said his party made tough decisions over the past seven years to get Nova Scotia's fiscal house in order.

But Mr. Dexter said there were casualties from the belt-tightening.

"They were tough on families, they were tough on students and they were tough on seniors."

Mr. MacDonald said he's the only one with a complete four-year plan to move the province into the black.

"We have half a plan on the other side and no plan in the middle," he said of the NDP and the Conservatives respectively.

Mr. MacKenzie said the NDP nearly ruined the economy of Ontario, something Mr. Dexter denied. "shopworn rhetoric."

The NDP leader defended the length of his party's platform, saying no government would have a four-year budget.

"We would make no decision that would take this province back into deficit," Mr. Dexter said.

Halifax resident Bill Kydd was one of four people in the studio audience who asked the leading question. He said it seemed they were trying to outspend each other in this campaign now that the province has started to recover financially, and he wondered, "Why are you so eager to plug the hole?"

The leaders all said their plans are affordable, but after the debate Mr. Kydd said he's still worried about how they'd handle the debt.

"Right now, interest rates are very low, but they're not going to stay that way, and we have to remember within the past decade they were laying off people and doing all sorts of drastic things to maintain our health-care system," said Mr. Kydd, who did give an edge to Mr. MacKenzie.

Shelly MacKenzie of Halifax said she thought Mr. Dexter was very articulate while Mr. MacKenzie's answers lacked substance and Mr. MacKenzie, no relation, was "a little inaccurate."

Even so, Ms. MacKenzie said she still isn't quite sure whom she'll support on June 13.

"I'll give it some more thought," she said.

But the debate did solidify Judith Richardson's opinion. She plans to vote Conservative after the 60-minute session from her seat in the audience.

"I think (Mr. MacDonald) stuck to the questions better than the other two," she said.

Political scientist Jeff MacLeod said he was surprised by the strength of Mr. MacKenzie's p and thought Mr. MacDonald should have been more aggressive.

"I think the premier was a bit more laid-back than he needed to be," the Mount Saint Vinc University professor said.

Green Leader Nick Wright, who was excluded from the debate, came to the CBC building i case to participate but was unsuccessful.

(djackson@herald.ca)

(asmith@herald.ca)

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