

## Porter O'Brien's New Brunswick Election '24 Watch List

With an experienced and knowledgeable team of political minds, Porter O'Brien has pooled its expertise into a guide for our clients and friends including analysis on key ridings and issues in the upcoming fall election scheduled for Oct. 21.

### OVERVIEW:

This election is a **referendum on Blaine Higgs' leadership**. The Premier of New Brunswick has faced numerous controversies in his six-year run as premier focusing on French immersion, Indigenous title claims, and his employment history. Higgs was a former Irving executive and former leadership candidate of the Confederation of Regions Party, an anti-bilingualism party, in the '80s. More recently, **ten Progressive Conservative MLAs won't be reoffering in the upcoming election**, many citing Higgs' lack of collaboration and resistance to feedback amongst his cabinet and caucus, especially when concerning Policy 713. Many of these are longtime former or current cabinet ministers with a decade or more time spent serving as MLAs.

This year, **party loyalties and value systems will be tested**. The north, typically more populated by Francophones, tend to vote Liberal. While the Progressive Conservative Party finds more support in the southern, Anglophone ridings. But the loss of several career MLAs, redrawn riding boundaries, and shifting provincial priorities may lead to unexpected results. When voters head to the polls with change on their mind, they tend to vote a current government out rather than vote a new one in.

In 2022, two stars of the People's Alliance Party crossed over to the PCs. With the party weakened, it strengthens the Tories' chances; they won't face the threat of a right-leaning vote split. The same cannot be said for the left-leaning vote. **The Greens remain strong** with leader David Coon and several strategic candidates, and it may make the Susan Holt-led Liberal Party's bid to form government a tougher climb. **Holt would be the first female premier of New Brunswick if elected**. She states it's time for change and results, but will continue to distance herself from decisions being made by her federal counterpart.

**Higgs is the first premier since Bernard Lord to win back-to-back elections**. This fall will prove to be a test on whether, despite controversy, he still holds the favour of New Brunswickers, or if it's time for a change.

## **RIDINGS WE'RE KEEPING AN EYE ON:**

### **Fredericton–Lincoln**

Green Party Leader David Coon is seeking his fourth mandate from constituents on Fredericton's south side, however this time around he will be dealing with a significant riding redistribution. Having lost a left-leaning portion of his soon-to-be former riding of Fredericton South, Coon will have to market himself to newly inherited sections of the riding where PC MLA Mary Wilson (Oromocto–Lincoln–Fredericton) found great success. Seeking to take down the political dragon in David Coon will be Daniel Chippin for the PCs and Joni Leger for the Liberals. Chippin brings knowledge from the business and economic sector to the table and will look to be the first PC since Craig Leonard to hold the capital region seat. Leger, a graduate of both Mount Allison and the University of New Brunswick, has spent the last decade working in research and innovation with post-secondary institutions. Leger was heavily involved as a volunteer in Moncton prior to moving to Fredericton with her partner and children in 2019.

### **Fredericton South–Silverwood**

After becoming MLA in Bathurst East–Nepisiguit–Saint-Isidore in 2023, Holt is returning to her home riding and vying for a seat in the province's capital. She'll face two other strong candidates from both the Greens and PCs. Green Party candidate Simon Ouellette has worked as the communications representative for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in Fredericton since 2016. And the PCs have Nicolle Carlin in the race, who worked with Blaine Higgs in the Premier's Office. With a strong Green candidate grabbing votes on the left and the history of the riding (pre-redistribution) favouring the Greens and their leader David Coon, the PCs and Liberals may have a tight race at the ballot box.

### **Grand Falls–Vallée-des-Rivières–Saint-Quentin**

A riding which has been a traditional Liberal stronghold in previous years, Chuck Chiasson will once again be on the ballot for the New Brunswick Liberals in this fall's election. Chiasson was extremely popular in the former riding of Victoria–La Vallée and the party is eager to see if that same support follows him to the new riding. Marc-André Ross will be running for the PCs and is striving to help Higgs make progress in the northern region of the province. Born and raised in Saint-Quentin, Ross spent several years as Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries Minister Margaret Johnson's executive assistant before moving to the Premier's Office as an assistant earlier this year. He looks to capitalize on some PC-leaning polls that have been added to the riding through this year's riding redistribution.

### **Hampton - Fundy - St. Martins**

Traditionally a Progressive Conservative stronghold, the riding was previously represented by former PC Environment Minister Gary Crossman. Despite his absence of endorsement, Faytene

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Grasseschi was acclaimed as the PC candidate to represent the party in late 2023. Grasseschi is a controversial candidate, known for her strong religious beliefs, staunch opposition to same sex-marriage, and strong support of Higgs' changes to Policy 713, and the local riding association stated they will not recognize any outcomes from the nomination convention. Liberal candidate John Herron is well-known in the riding, having previously served as the federal member of parliament for the riding of Fundy Royal from 1997 to 2004. Of note, Herron was a Progressive Conservative MP during his time in federal politics, but left the party in 2004 when it became the Conservative Party of Canada.

### **Kent North**

Kevin Arseneau has been a key player of the NB Green Party caucus since 2018. An advocate for Acadians, and a farmer and entrepreneur, Arseneau was a popular pick for the riding of Kent North. But this fall, former popular MP Pat Finnigan is returning to provincial politics to attempt to win the riding back over to Liberal. This region, despite shifting riding boundaries, has voted mostly for the Liberals in past years. During his six years in parliament, he served on agriculture committees, fitting for Finnigan who proudly runs a greenhouse business and was President of the NB Agricultural Alliance. It's projected to be a toss-up between the two on election night.

### **Moncton South**

Will Moncton South maintain its reputation as a bellwether riding this fall and have its MLA's party mirror the governing party? The race is projected to be a toss up between PC Greg Turner, a well-known businessman and former city councillor in Moncton, and Liberal candidate and Université de Moncton assistant professor, Claire Johnson. Turner is currently cabinet minister for several portfolios focusing on workforce development and training sectors, having replaced Arlene Dunn as Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training, and Labour after her resignation in early 2024. Johnson meanwhile has a background in healthcare and social issues, is knowledgeable on the topic of food insecurity, and holds a PhD in population health.

### **Saint John Harbour**

Saint John Harbour has been without an MLA for the past six months, following the resignation of Arlene Dunn, the former PC MLA who resigned following a variety of issues, including her disagreement with Higgs on Policy 713. The riding is typically considered a toss-up between the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives, with razor-thin margins historically separating the parties. Well-known city councillor David Hickey is running for the Liberals this year, while the PCs are being represented by Adam Smith, who previously served as an executive assistant to a cabinet minister in the Higgs government. The Green Party is also running candidate Mariah Darling, who is related to former well-known Saint John Mayor Don Darling.

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### **Saint John Portland–Simonds**

In March, former veteran Minister Trevor Holder announced that he would not be reoffering in the fall, which signalled the end of his 25-year dynasty as Progressive Conservative MLA for Saint John Portland – Simonds. Running to fill his absence in the PC Party is Paul Dempsey, a retired navy captain who served in the military for 36 years. He'll be facing off against Dr. John Dornan, the New Brunswick Liberals' candidate and the former CEO of Horizon Health. Following the death of a patient in an ER waiting room, Blaine Higgs fired Dornan from his role as Horizon Health CEO in July of 2022. As a result, Dornan sued the province. An adjudicator subsequently awarded him \$2 million for an unjust dismissal. This fall, he says he's back to complete "unfinished business" with the issue of primary health care taking precedence. Dr. Dornan is considered a star candidate for the Liberals, and will seek to break the PCs' stronghold on the riding in the upcoming campaign.

### **Tracadie**

Keith Chiasson, the incumbent Liberal MLA for the area won the last campaign by a substantial margin in this heavily Francophone riding, however the PC Party has also had success in the region, having held the seat from 1994 to 2014. With new riding boundaries in place for this election, the PCs hope they will take back the riding from the Liberals. Making the race even more interesting, the Greens are running a well-known candidate, Serge Brideau, a musician who fronts the popular Acadian band "Les Hôtesses d'Hilaire" and who is an outspoken advocate for official language rights. In addition, the status of the former Tracadie Range, a past military site currently undergoing clearance work for unexploded explosive ordnance (UXO), is front and centre on the minds of voters in the region. Residents are split on what to do with the property, with the Government of New Brunswick supporting a proposal to use the land for agricultural purposes, including the development of wild blueberries.

## **KEY ISSUES WE'RE KEEPING AN EYE ON:**

### **Healthcare**

With roughly one in five residents reporting they do not have permanent access to a primary care provider, healthcare continues to be a primary concern for New Brunswickers. Several deaths in ERs have made headlines recently, many complaining about the lack of access and long wait times in ERs due to a lack of staffing, and provincial struggles with recruitment and retention. The Higgs government faced backlash with their hiring of travel nurses, who were often more well paid than local nurses. Although the rollout of NB Health Link in 2022 helped to lessen the burden on primary health care providers and ERs, more improvements are needed, and all parties have pledged to do better. One of Holt's primary campaign promises was the implementation of 30 collaborative care clinics across the province before 2028.

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## **Education**

Premier Blaine Higgs has been at the centre of controversies focused on schools, 2SLGBTQIA+ issues in schools, and French immersion throughout his run as premier. He was met with widespread backlash when he tried to replace the French immersion program in 2022 and later abandoned the endeavour. He and Education Minister Bill Hogan are also responsible for the changes made to Policy 713 which stated it was no longer mandatory for teachers to use the preferred pronouns or names of students under age 16. Minister of Education Bill Hogan said later that it was forbidden. Following that, the District Education Council for Anglophone East took the province to court claiming changes to Policy 713 violate the rights of students. In addition, three out of four anglophone districts reported they were operating 32 teachers short in September, with 132 people with local-permit contracts filling the gap of teachers with education degrees left by the shortage.

## **Affordability**

All three major parties have responded to rising costs in groceries, gas, rent, and other basic necessities, by making the issue of affordability a central aspect of their campaigns. The PCs promised to cut the HST by two percent over two years if re-elected, which would reduce the rate to 13 per cent. The Liberals meanwhile indicated that if elected they would implement a rent cap. They also promised to remove provincial sales tax from new developments and household electricity bills. The Green Party committed to implementing a rent cap.

## **Indigenous Relations**

Tensions between the Higgs government and First Nations in New Brunswick have risen to boiling on matters such as title and treaty rights, consultation practices, justice, and revenue sharing, and has spent millions of taxpayer dollars in legal fees to bolster the government's decisions. Scrapping the tax-revenue sharing agreements with First Nations, for example, has left communities without funds to provide basic health and education services on reserves. The province issued an edict against referring to the lands and waters as "unceded" in provincial land acknowledgements. In the era of reconciliation, many are watching what our leaders do to support these efforts meaningfully.

## **SUMMARY:**

Members of the Porter O'Brien team have different predictions on the outcome of this election. The one thing we agree on, is that it will be a tight race that could turn on a dime. New Brunswick politics is notorious for unpredictable and unusual political upsets based on fast-moving issues. When the election is officially called by the Premier on or before September 19, we will all be getting out our popcorn ready to watch what will surely be a fascinating

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political showdown. Stay tuned! We will be sharing more analysis throughout the election campaign.

## **CONTACT US:**

With a diverse set of backgrounds and skills, our team is ready to support you and your organisation with public relations, government relations, management, training, and more. We've supported hundreds of clients to achieve their goals; we can help you too!

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