

Elizabeth Witmer

Elizabeth Witmer grew up in a small Ontario town guided by her father who was a school custodian and her mother, a housecleaner. It was in these formative years that Witmer absorbed the values and strong work ethic that would make her one of the most powerful women in Ontario politics.



As a Member of Provincial Parliament for Kitchener-Waterloo since 1990, Witmer has served in many high-profile posts including Minister of Labour, Health, Environment and Education and as Deputy Premier of Ontario.

After her party was defeated in the 2003 election, she was named the Deputy Leader of the Official Opposition and Critic for Long-Term Care and Women's Issues.

Witmer served in Cabinet under the leadership of former Premier Mike Harris and his Common Sense Revolution. However, when she ran for the Tory leadership in 2002 she articulated a more moderate approach to governance.

"The coming challenge is to rebuild what I call our human infrastructure. The people who work in health care, education, childcare and the public service need to know that their government appreciates and respects them," she said.

Witmer was unsuccessful in her bid for leadership but has not ruled out running again in the future. Witmer's interest in politics was likely sparked by her father Josef Gosar, who supported former Tory Premier Bill Davis. Gosar died of cancer during Witmer's 2002 leadership campaign. It was a difficult time for Witmer, who also lost her father-in-law and an uncle that year.

During a later speech Witmer commented that the difficulties of political life are buffered by her strong Christian faith and devotion to her husband and two children. "No matter what you do in professional life, it's family life that matters," she said.

Witmer, who as a young girl had dreamed of becoming a teacher, attended the University of Western Ontario before getting her teaching degree at Althouse College of Education in London. She worked as a high school teacher for twelve years, beginning in 1968.

She was first elected to the Waterloo County Board of Education in 1980 and served the board for ten years, becoming chairwoman in 1984. She was defeated in her first attempt as a Progressive Conservative candidate in the 1987 Ontario election.

She won the Waterloo North seat, however, in 1990 and has represented Kitchener-Waterloo at Queen's Park ever since.

While her first five years were spent in Opposition, Witmer was moved into strong cabinet positions when the Tories swept to power in 1995. At the centre of many

controversies - including changes to labour legislation and cutbacks in health care during the Common Sense Revolution - Witmer is known for never losing her cool.

It is often written that Witmer has refused a subsidized apartment in Toronto; instead opting to commute back and forth from Waterloo to be with her family and save taxpayers' money.

“We need to embrace a conservatism that is caring,” she said during her leadership bid. “Not narrow, but broad; not harsh, but kind; not divisive, but inclusive.... Help me show Ontarians that common sense and compassion go hand in hand.”

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Witmer, MPP