

Bill Rea ? Another election night

There was an evening about 20 years ago, while I was working in Toronto, when I was on deck to help a colleague cover a Provincial by-election.

Since I had a couple of hours of down time before the polls closed, and since she lived not far from where I'd be working that night, I had dinner with my mother: More accurately, I let her cook dinner for me.

It didn't take her long to notice that there were other things on my mind. I kept fidgeting, picking at my food, looking at my watch, etc. The fact was I had an election night to cover and I was anxious to get at it.

"You're really looking forward to tonight," Mom said at one point.

"This is one of the things I got into this business to do," I replied, probably with a grin on my clock.

Election nights are exhilarating, and I can still make that statement even at my advanced age. Last Monday basically offered me a chance to underscore that statement.

I made sure I was home early enough for my wife and I to get out and vote. Then, since the polls didn't close until 9:30, I put the time to good use by taking a nap. That was followed by dinner before leaving Beth to channel-hop between the election results and the Blue Jays while I went about the night's work.

I made a brief stop at the Caledon home of NDP candidate Rehya Yazbek before proceeding to Orangeville, filled with expectations for the evening.

I confidently expected that David Tilson would keep his seat, representing Dufferin-Caledon in the House of Commons, although he would not pull off the blow-out he did four years ago, but more about that later.

I also expected that the Liberals would be ahead in the seat count, but shy of a majority. Was that just wishful thinking?

It turns out some of my election night projections were wrong, and that is certainly not the first time that's happened to me. But it is a fact that I was hoping for a minority.

While majority governments have their place, allowing those in charge to take action that might amount to stiff, but necessary, medicine, minority governments are obliged to be more in tune with what the public wants. And since it's the public who pays the taxes and who is supposed to call the shots in a democracy, there's a certain propriety in that.

There are benefits to minority governments.

Had Dalton McGuinty been held to a minority in 2003, I doubt we would have seen that Health Care Premium in the 2004 budget that we're still living with. Had Kathleen Wynne been asked to form a minority government last year, I believe plans to sell portions of Hydro One would currently be parked on some shelf.

I got an email from a friend of mine who is very knowledgeable about such things last weekend (he's probably the most complete political animal I know). He announced he was being bold by predicting a Liberal majority. My first inclination was to shrug that off, but I also realized that this guy's opinion was not something to dismiss. And he was right.

That the Liberals should come out ahead in the seat count should not be a surprise. Indeed, I have been predicting that for some time. History records the Liberals were badly dinged in the 2011 campaign, under the tepid leadership of Michael Ignatieff, resulting in the Grits being knocked down to third-party status in the House. Meanwhile, the NDP, under the inspirational leadership of the late Jack Layton, turned heads all over the country. They took on the position, with appropriate gusto, of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition.

But as I have been writing for some months, Trudeau is a credible leader for the Liberals, and with all due respect to Tom Mulcair, he is no Jack Layton.

I think there were many people figuring that Mulcair would have built on the base that the party established four years ago. I'm more inclined to think that base was really a fluke, resulting from that bazaar Ignatieff-Layton combination. The fact is I think last week's results for the New Democrats reflect a great deal of reality.

I was a little surprised that the Green Party didn't do better. I've heard some speculation that they are on their way out, but I don't believe it.

Closer to home, I thought former Mississauga mayor Hazel McCallion's endorsement couldn't possibly have been anything but a benefit to Trudeau. The woman still has a lot of clout in the GTA. And I think Stephen Harper's buddying up with Rob and Doug Ford was politically nothing short of dumb. Did he seriously think he was going to get traction from something like that?

And on to the local scene.

As I stated above, I was expecting Tilson to keep his job, although it was gong to be closer than 2011. I thought Ed Crewson put it rather well when he observed that this area has a tradition of voting for Conservatives. It happens to be true.

Tilson took about 59 per cent of the vote in 2011. I doubt even he thought he'd be able to do that again.

Ard Van Leeuwen of the Green Party did look impressive coming in second in 2011, but the fact is he was almost 45 percentage points off the pace.

The NDP colours in 2011 were carried by someone named Leslie Parsons, who collected 6,409 votes, almost 2,000 more than Yazbek got this year. I have never met Parsons. I don't even know if Leslie is a man or a woman. This person did no active campaigning or made any attempt to be available to the local media, and I tried plenty of times to make contact. The head NDP office in Ottawa was unable to offer much help in connecting us. Yet Parsons managed to get more than 6,000 votes for third place. Liberal Bill Prout finished last in that four-way race, but I don't think that was a reflection on him. Just as the absent Parsons benefitted from the leadership of Layton by personally doing nothing, I think Prout suffered from Ignatieff.

Again, I thought the results in Dufferin-Caledon four years ago were something of a fluke.

I knew Crewson's vote count was going to improve over four years ago, but as I already indicated, I was pretty sure he wouldn't unseat Tilson.

If there was any surprise for me, it was that Green candidate Nancy Urekar's numbers weren't higher. My theory (and it's only a theory) is there was a sizable movement in this riding (across the whole country too) to get Harper out, and a lot of those people figured a vote for Crewson was the best way to do it.

I was pleased to see the voter turnout figures were higher this time out; on the order of 68.49 per cent, according to Elections Canada. It's been a lot better, but it's an improvement over the 61.1 per cent in 2011. Things are headed in the right direction

