

Bill Rea ? Prime Minister Mulcair?

Granting what seems to be almost obvious, we're going to have a federal election this year.

And given the latest polling numbers, the possibility exists that we could have a New Democrat government in Ottawa after the votes are counted.

Then there's the obvious fact; one that people reporting these poll numbers will never dare tell you ? these latest figures are meaningless.

That's not to say there's something to gain from practising how the words ?Prime Minister Mulcair? roll off the tongue. A lot of Canadians (myself included) toyed with the idea of ?Prime Minister Layton? in the final days of the 2011 campaign. Surprising things can happen in just about any election.

I have been actively covering campaigns for one media outlet or another for more than 30 years. I have learned the hard way that there is always room for surprises. I once made the mistake of putting my municipal election predictions on the record before the votes were cast, and regretted it deeply when the results came in (the late Richard Whitehead never let me live that one down).

But it is also true that many voters have yet to make up their minds, and could simply be indicating support for the party they might currently favour.

When the media reports poll numbers, you frequently hear or read the words, ?If an election were held today.? The reason these latest poll results are meaningless is an election is not going to be held today, or tomorrow or next Monday. There are still a couple of months to go.

At times like this, a lot of people ?park? their votes. That term was first used on me some 20 years ago, when I was working in parts of Toronto and the NDP were still in charge at Queen's Park. The then opposition Liberals had surged well out in front in the polls, and I asked one of my local MPPs, cabinet minister Marilyn Churley, if she was upset by that. She said it wasn't that big a deal, since people tend to ?park their votes? between elections.

My real reason for citing this particular anecdote here is history records when that election finally came, neither the Liberals or NDP formed the government. The big winners that time out were Mike Harris and the Tories. So much for polls with an election months in the future.

Can the New Democrats form the next government? My gut tells me that's not likely (I wonder what Whitehead would be saying now), but it is also true that my gut was telling me the same thing during the 1990 provincial campaign in Ontario (that's the one the NDP won). But like I stated above, in politics, and especially elections, there's always plenty of room for surprises.

Earlier this year, New Democrats were elected to form a majority government in Alberta. Anyone making such a prediction a couple of years ago would have been sent straight to the nearest rubber room.

Add the results in Alberta to the very impressive results the NDP had federally in 2011, and I would say there's a lot of justification for cockiness in the Thomas Mulcair camp.

But it is also true that times have changed, and this is not 2011.

There are at least two factors that played a big role in the NDP performance in '11, and I have cited them in the past.

One was the fact the Liberals did not have an effective leader in Michael Ignatieff. Justin Trudeau is a different matter. He's got a credibility that Ignatieff seriously lacked. True, the man has never led the party in a national campaign, but there's a first time for everyone. Besides, it's obvious the Conservatives are taking him seriously. The attack ads have started against Trudeau, with the tag line ?He's just not ready.? You don't waste money and resources like that to combat a pushover.

The other factor in 2011 was the dynamic leadership of the late Jack Layton, although I will admit some personal bias might be at work here. Layton was a municipal councillor during the time I worked in Toronto, representing much of the same area as Churley. We spoke frequently (he was always very good at returning calls), and while I seldom agreed with the man politically, he was very easy to like and respect, and his sincerity to the causes he worked for could not be questioned. I had moved on to other things when he became leader of the federal NDP, but I was delighted with the way things turned out. To be honest, I would not have been too upset if the 2011 election had resulted in an NDP minority (it would have been nice to be on a first-name basis with the Prime Minister). I genuinely grieved at his death. Is Thomas Mulcair another Jack Layton? No answer yet.

I read an interesting article, online, by By James Armstrong, senior web coordinator with Global News.

?If an election were held today, Tom Mulcair would be Canada's next Prime Minister,? was the opening line of the article (and I think we've already dealt with the likelihood of an election today).

The article and accompanying attachments went on to analyze the country, riding by riding (the Conservatives are expected to take Dufferin-Caledon, to the astonishment of no one, I'm sure), and it predicts the NDP will take 130 of them, to 119 for the Tories and

86 for the Grits. Bloc Quebecois and the Green Party are expected to be represented in the House of Commons too. Assuming these predictions play out (big assumption), Mulcair will be 40 seats shy of a majority, meaning to a large extent, he will govern at the pleasure of the opposition. Who would lead that opposition would be open to speculation. My gut (reliable as always) would tell me that Trudeau would probably be given another chance. Lots of successful leaders come up short in their first campaigns, as the likes of Stephen Harper, Mike Harris, Dalton McGuinty and others have demonstrated. If the Tories are tossed from power, I would expect they would start shopping around for another leader. There are a couple of ways this thing could go between now and the election. The numbers (for the time being, we'll stick to the numbers of seats in the House) could stay pretty much where they are. The NDP surge could continue, and if they add another 40 seats to their total, they are in majority territory. The surge could reverse itself, revealing itself as another case of people parking their votes. I've learned my lesson about making such predictions more than 20 years ago, and I learned it the hard way. But there are other factors that are going to come into play here. The Tories say in their attack ads that Trudeau's 'just not ready,' and the Grits are firing back. What are the Conservatives and Liberals going to start saying about Mulcair? And how is he going to respond? And who's going to be prime minister of this country a year from now

