

Claire Hoy ? Diefenbaker wasn't far off the mark

It was former prime minister John Diefenbaker who famously quipped that, 'polls are for dogs,' a rather obvious expression of just how, exactly, he felt about them.

And while Old Dief may have been a tad harsh in his judgment about the 'science' of polling, recent political events have shown that he wasn't really that far off the mark.

While these polls over the years have become an endemic part of the political landscape ? being relied upon more and more by journalists who actually used to go out and talk to people rather than simply download polls numbers ? the results of last week's British Columbia election should give even the most ardent poll supporter pause.

While the pollsters spectacularly blew the B.C. results ? and the media followed in lock-step by predicting an NDP landslide (and not the relatively easy Liberal majority) ? pollsters didn't fare a whole lot better in the 2012 Alberta election either, missing the winning Tory vote by an embarrassing 10.6 percent on average, while overestimating the ultimate Wild Rose Party vote by a healthy 6.3 per cent.

They also missed badly in the 2011 provincial elections in Manitoba, Newfoundland and PEI, and barely made the margin of error in the 2011 federal election, again underestimating the Tory vote.

Pretty well everybody in the media and political world had already given the



NDP the election in B.C. based on polls which consistently showed them well ahead of the sitting Liberals. While a few did show the Liberals closing the gap, none came close to reflecting the real mood of the electorate.

Naturally, pollsters were quick to explain that part of the problem was that many voters made up their minds at the last minute in the polling booth ? just exactly how they know this is a question mark ? and some even argued that the relatively low turnout favoured the Liberals because, as one prominent pollster was quoted as saying, a low turnout tends to favour the party in power and 'the NDP didn't get their vote out.'

He went on to say 'People who actually stayed home were more likely NDP supporters who wanted change from the outset. And those who showed up had been convinced by the advertisers that they needed to get out to make sure that they didn't change the government. This really goes to a campaign dynamic.'

Oh sure. If the pollster was so smart, how come he didn't know all this before the fact? And just how, exactly, does he know it now? Did he do a poll of stay-at-home voters or is he just blowing smoke to cover his own firm's failure?

The answer, given the bad polling results, is obvious. They blew it. Again.

Fact is, polls have been getting less and less accurate for many years now, but pollsters ? and their apologists in the media ? haven't wanted to admit it.

There are reasons for this, the main one being that polling has become less and less representative of the voting public because fewer and fewer people actually take the time required to talk to pollsters and fewer and fewer people actually have old-style land-line phones.

In addition, pollsters tend to miss out on the so-called ethnic voters, a block of votes which, given Canada's demographic realities, has become a much more important chunk on the electorate.

Ask yourself this: If it takes 25 phone calls to find one person willing to talk to a pollster ? and this isn't particularly unusual these days ? then who is really a random representative of the voting electorate ? the 24 who hung up or the one with the time and inclination to spent a half-an-hour or so on the phone with a pollster?

One problem that your correspondent has always had with polls is that even if they do accurately reflect public opinions ? and they sometimes do ? they are often polling people who aren't going to vote anyway.

So if you tell a pollster you support the Liberals say, but have no intention of voting anyway, what's the point? What does it matter what you think if you're not voting? And given that half the electorate didn't vote, that's hardly a moot point.

Even some veteran journalists who have been treating polls as the Holy Grail have been publicly expressing skepticism as a result of both the B.C. and Alberta polling debacles.

Not that this will slow down the onslaught of polling which always accompanies elections.

But it might cause the public at large to be more skeptical and lean more toward Diefenbaker's view rather than buy into the self-serving blather we continue to hear from the pollsters themselves.