

Claire Hoy ? Hudak?s less popular than his party

First, a little political history.

In 1969, in the face of the record-breaking, uninterrupted 43-year history of Tory rule in Ontario, an unknown Anglican archdeacon named Kenneth Bolton stunned the political world by winning a by-election in the riding of Middlesex South for ? of all parties ? the NDP.

This was a riding that had been solidly Tory, seemingly forever, and was on the outskirts of London, home to the popular premier John Robarts, a man who had cruised to yet another easy majority government just two years earlier. The Tories had expected a cakewalk, but didn't get it.

As you'd expect, NDP officials were jubilant on election night and offered the by-election as evidence that they were on the march and the Tories were in trouble.

But just two years later, under new Tory premier Bill Davis, the Tories won an even bigger majority ? the biggest in Ontario history up to that time ? and Bolton was easily defeated by the Tories in Middlesex South.

Which brings us, as you may have guessed, to last week's five Ontario by-elections, where the ruling Liberals, clearly in political trouble, lost three of the five ridings they had held, giving up two to the NDP and one to the Tories.

NDP Leader Andrea Horvath, much like 1969 NDP leader Donald MacDonald, proclaimed that her party's strong showing bodes well for her party's future and is an ill wind for both the Tories and the Liberals. We'll see.

There is little doubt that the Liberals are suffering from the fallout of a series of scandals under former premier Dalton McGuinty. It is true, as current Premier Kathleen Wynne has said, that by-elections are often an easy chance for people to send a message, since they know their vote will not change the government makeup from one party to another.

And it is equally true that historically speaking, the NDP does better in by-elections than they do in general elections because it allows them to focus their union organizations on a few ridings rather than have to spread them out across the entire province.

But it is also true that the Liberals hadn't lost a by-election in a riding they had held since 2007. Last Thursday they lost three of them, two of which had been held by powerful cabinet ministers.

As for Hudak, he had to be happy to see Toronto's deputy mayor Doug Holyday give his party a long-sought foothold in Toronto, but it was a mixed bag for him, given the fact that public opinion polls ? which continue to be way off base in election after election ? had the Tories leading in two other ridings.

Hudak is clearly less popular than his party is, a situation which is the exact reverse for Wynne. Granted, leaders don't have to be loved to win ? and many popular leaders haven't won ? but it wouldn't hurt the Tories if Hudak decided at some point to get a personality transplant and appear a tad more humane and humorous to people.

In Etobicoke-Lakeshore, where Toronto Mayor Rob Ford openly campaigned for Holyday against Toronto councillor Peter Milczyn, the provincial Liberals were outraged over Ford's efforts. The day before the election, Transportation Minister Glen Murray ? a former Winnipeg mayor who should know better ? thundered, ?A provincial election is none of the mayor's business.? Really? Surely elections are everybody's business. Anyway, Wynne and some of her ministers had no hesitation in knocking Ford when the Toronto Star and others were caught up in a feeding frenzy to paint the mayor as unfit to govern. But I guess Murray thinks it's okay for them to comment on City Hall, but not okay for City Hall to comment on Queen's Park. And odd view of free speech, don't you think?

Another humorous aspect of the Etobicoke-Lakeshore race was that Milczyn, the Liberal, constantly referred to Holyday as running for the Hudak-Harris team. That's Mike Harris, of course, the former Tory premier who has been out of office for 10 years. Even when he was in office, Hudak, a relative newcomer at the time, held a couple of minor cabinet posts. He was hardly a major player. Wynne, on the other hand, was a senior minister for McGuinty. She clearly knew all about the gas plant boondoggle ? particularly as deputy leader of the party's last election campaign ? and, despite her empty rhetoric about a ?new? Liberal government, she's stuck with the McGuinty brush.

So there you have it. Five by-elections are done. The opposition can't do much until a Throne Speech or budget next Spring, so Wynne's minority government continues to limp along. The only real impact of the by-elections is that the results make the opposition parties more keen for a general election and give the Liberals more pause.

Either way, that's not such a bad thing.

