

Claire Hoy, National Affairs ? Hudak made it a Hobson's choice

Apparently failed Tory leader Tim Hudak was never a boxer. Had he been, he would have learned long ago not to lead with his chin.

But the moment he announced that much-maligned plan to cut 100,000 jobs ? and create a million new ones ? he allowed both Premier Kathleen Wynne and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath to literally punch him all over the electoral ring.

So instead of the election issue being focussed on the incompetency and corruption of the ruling Liberals ? and no doubt much to Wynne's considerable joy and surprise ? Hudak's folly allowed the entire campaign to be about him and his highly suspect promises. It also allowed the Liberals to prove once again that fear works. They've done it successfully in federal campaigns ? particularly against the old Reform Party and Stephen Harper's early attempts at victory (remember all the terror about the so-called ?hidden agenda?) ? and they did it again this time with Hudak, warning that the end of the Ontario we all know and love would be guaranteed with a Hudak victory.

As a result, one of the worst governments in Ontario history has been given the green light to continue their profligate spending and wanton waste, this time without even having to worry about the mitigating impact of a minority government. Well done, Tim. This extraordinary campaign screwup is right up there with a previous one when current Toronto mayoralty candidate John Tory was leading the Tory party to defeat based on a highly unpopular proposal to fund all private schools in the province out of the public purse.

And now this, Hudak's plan to assure that anybody who worked for the government ? and anybody in any union in the province ? would be energized to get out there and make sure he didn't get the chance to carry out his plan.

Never mind that his 100,000-job-cut proposal actually isn't that radical. All it would have done was to reduce the public service to its 2009 levels, and it would have been done over four years and largely through attrition.

But that, dear hearts, was quickly beside the point. By proposing it, he allowed both Wynne and Horwath to deliberately misrepresent the plan by claiming over and over again that Hudak was going to ?fire? 100,000 public servants.

In truth, of course, he wasn't. But truth is rarely a valuable commodity during hotly contested election campaigns.

And by doing what he did, Hudak took the pressure off both Wynne and Horwath to explain to Ontarians a)-why they should be trusted with government and b)-what exactly they would do once they got in there.

Both Hudak and John Tory now share the ignominy of snatching defeat from the jaws of certain victory.

Most Ontarians, at least according to the public opinion polls (suspect as they are), felt that the Liberals didn't deserve another shot at government. They knew in their hearts, having watched them operate for the past decade, that they couldn't be trusted.

But Hudak made it the classic Hobson's choice and, as a result, a lot of Ontarians held their noses and cast their lot in with the Liberals once again, leaving the Tories a distant second and the NDP in their customary third-place slot.

People love to say that the problem with most politicians is that they aren't honest or straightforward when it comes to saying what they want to do. Well, Hudak was straightforward all right. The problem was, he scared the people ? and, as we've said, allowed his opponents to scare them even more about his plan ? and so despite their wariness about the Liberals, Wynne became the least offensive of the three choices.

It is hard to think of a government which has so richly deserved being booted out of office but which, despite their worst efforts, ended up garnering even more support than it had before the election was called.

But, as we've said, that had less to do with Wynne's performance and more to do with Hudak's wrongheaded campaign.

Whether it was sheer stupidity or a naive view of the electorate, who knows? Likely it came as a result of too many eggheads with little real-world experience sitting in a room and coming up with a great theoretical plan to solve Ontario's major fiscal woes.

Whatever. It obviously was a disaster, and now we're stuck with the Liberals again.

Good luck with that.