

Editorial ? A crowded middle of the road?

At a time when the United States is afflicted with divisiveness of a sort not found since the Civil War of the 1860s, Ontario appears to be approaching a general election in June that may see three political parties all seeming to occupy the middle of the political spectrum.

The traditional occupants of that part of the spectrum, the governing Liberals, have moved a bit to the left, courting young potential voters with a big increase in the minimum wage, some free prescription drugs and more generous aid to post-secondary students. Meanwhile, the Progressive Conservatives seem to be putting more emphasis on 'Progressive' with the platform recently unveiled by leader Patrick Brown.

Dubbed the People's Guarantee, the Tory platform paper runs 78 pages and includes no fewer than 147 promises, among them sharply lower middle income tax rates, a 12-per-cent cut in hydro rates, write-offs for child care and new spending on mental-health care.

'With our platform, you will pay less and you will get more,' Brown has vowed, saying that if he doesn't deliver on his main commitments, he wouldn't stick around for a second term as Ontario premier. And to hammer the point home, he signed a written pledge before roughly 1,500 cheering delegates at a party convention in Toronto.

However, some critics have concluded that the pledges are fiscally risky and economically incoherent. Some say that to keep all the promises the Tories would have to choose between big deficits and about \$12 billion in service cuts, none of which are mentioned in the platform.

At present, the coming election is the third in which the Tories enjoyed a big lead over the Liberals, in large part because of what the public perceived as either scandals or massive wastes of taxpayers' dollars.

In 2010 and 2014, the leads vanished, thanks to unwise promises to fund private schools and trim 100,000 civil service jobs, but this time the lead should hold, for at least three good reasons.

Perhaps biggest of the three is the fact the Liberals have been in power 14 years - a long time, but well short of the 42 years Ontario was a Tory bastion under premiers George Drew, Leslie Frost, John Robarts, Bill Davis and (briefly) Frank Miller.

Generally speaking, the cry 'Time for a change!' will win a positive response after a dozen or so years.

Another reason lies in opinion polls, which show that Premier Kathleen Wynne's popularity has dipped well below even the approval rankings of U.S. President Donald Trump - 19 per cent in a poll last June, compared with Trump's current rating of 33 per cent.

The third reason is the traditional ability of a huge portion of Ontario voters to swing between the two 'old line' parties, and to favour the party that's not in power at Ottawa, usually supporting Liberal prime ministers Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien.

Of course, the big unknown is the extent to which the New Democrats will eat into the Liberal base. It remains to be seen whether the NDP will once more court the uncommitted voters or return to their traditional role of posing well to the left of the Grits.

In both the Ontario election of 2014 and the federal election the following year, the NDP's moderate platforms led to the loss of many of their supporters, either because they saw the Liberals as less of a problem than the Tories or liked the leadership style of Wynne and Justin Trudeau.

But moderation did work for then-leader Bob Rae in 1990 when he simply appealed to the voters to punish Liberal premier David Peterson for calling an election in the third year of his second term in office.

No such mistake will be made by Wynne, but the 1990 election showed once and for all that in Ontario politics since the 1980s, there's no such thing as a sure winner.