

Editorial ? PCs? choice: leadership or policies

As most followers of the provincial political scene know, there is a movement afoot within Ontario's Progressive Conservative party to have a leadership review.

The issue was examined in recent columns in Toronto's two Sunday papers, one by a former Tory cabinet minister and the other by a former speech writer for Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

In his weekly Toronto Sun column, John Snobelen, a former education minister in the Mike Harris government, argued against any review of Tim Hudak's leadership, saying what the party really needs to win the next provincial election is to develop some thoughtful policies.

The contrary view was expressed in the Sunday Star by the former speech writer, Michael Taube, who argued that it's time for Hudak to step down and let someone else become leader, preferably a member of the current federal cabinet.

His contention is that while Ontarians are angry at the minority Liberal government for its financial scandals, headed by the two costly gas plant cancellations, they don't have enough confidence in the PCs. Hudak has had too many missed opportunities, and too many electoral failures. His political and economic message hasn't resonated with the general public.

He went on to suggest that the party avoid the temptation of choosing a Red Tory (or left-leaning conservative) as the next party leader, since that wouldn't represent even moderate conservative values. He argued that the electoral failures of Ernie Eves and John Tory proved his point.

What the party needs, he contended, was a leader who could appeal to conservatives, libertarians and other right-leaning individuals and who would promise smaller government, lower taxes, a vibrant free market economy, trade liberalization and efficiently-run social services.

In contrast, Snobelen said the PCs need to focus the attention of Ontarians on issues that matter. A long-term energy policy that can provide a competitive advantage for Ontario workers is much more important than a final reckoning of the cost of the gas plant closures, a political decision made by a former premier.

He reasoned that while the blame game is a more convenient path to follow and political beauty contests far easier to critique, Ontarians deserve better.

We think he's absolutely right, and one of the smartest things Hudak could do now is turn the attention of the legislature committee investigating the gas plant scandal to the process that led to selection of wholly inappropriate sites for the two large industrial facilities.

As for the counter argument that the PCs need a Harperite who could move the party farther right, it ignores the fact that even with massive voter support in Alberta, polls show the federal Conservatives currently garnering fewer than four votes in 10.

Also ignored are the facts that former premiers Leslie Frost, John Robarts and Bill Davis were all moderates and that John Tory's loss is usually attributed to his support for provincial funding of private schools.

While there's no doubt that no one likes to pay taxes, it's clear that lowering current tax rates would merely increase the annual government deficits, making illusory any thought of eventually having budget surpluses.