

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? A foul stench in Sudbury's air

The muck, as it will, thickens.

With less than three weeks to go in an increasingly nasty provincial by-election in Sudbury, the ugly underbelly of Premier Kathleen Wynne's Liberal machine is leaking ooze.

And the early polls indicate that she and her Liberal team could pay a hefty price for it.

Normally, a by-election just months after voters elected a majority government wouldn't cause much of a stir. After all, Wynne has a comfortable majority at Queen's Park, and even though her party lost to the NDP in Sudbury last time out, it's not going to make any difference whatsoever to her ability to push her agenda through the Legislature.

And yet ? yet ? right from the outset there was a foul stench in the air, and it had nothing to do with the giant Inco Superstack which has been a long-time symbol of Sudbury's nickel industry.

To begin with, the by-election was needed so soon after a general election because newly elected NDP MPP Joe Cimino resigned for ?personal? reasons, leaving the seat suddenly vacant.

That gave Liberal Andrew Olivier ? who lost to Cimino by less than 1,000 votes last year ? a good chance to reclaim the riding for the Liberals. Olivier, who became a quadriplegic from a hockey accident on his 15th birthday, quickly made it known that he planned to seek the nomination again.

But a funny ? er, sleazy ? thing happened on the way to the nomination meeting.

Olivier had a meeting with Liberal operative Gerry Lougheed and a later phone call from Pat Sorbora, a senior staffer in Wynne's office, and was told essentially that he wasn't wanted as a candidate.

However ? and here's where it may have crossed the line from partisan muscle to election law-breaking ? both men discussed with Olivier what he might wish to do instead of being the candidate.

In short, Olivier says he was offered a reward to step aside. The Liberals deny it. But Olivier has subsequently released tapes of the meetings and phone call which appear to support his version of events. If he's right, then Wynne and/or her representatives have broken the law.

It turns out that the reason Wynne was so anxious to quietly dispose of the pesky Olivier was that she already had a candidate in mind ? Glenn Thibeault, who before becoming the official provincial Liberal candidate for Sudbury was in Ottawa sitting as the NDP MP for the riding.

So now, instead of one by-election, Sudbury voters are going to have to endure two ? one provincial and one federal.

Last month, announcing her appointment of the NDP-turned-Liberal candidate Thibeault, Wynne claimed ?electoral urgency? prompted her to make the move ?so we can have a representative who is strong and part of a government that is implementing a plan that is good for Sudbury.?

Urgency? What urgency? Wynne already holds 58 seats in the Legislature, 10 more than the Tories and NDP combined, so one seat either way won't make any difference. And given Olivier's strong showing last time, surely the Liberals had a better than even chance of winning anyway.

While Wynne continues to claim complete innocence, both opposition parties have asked Elections Ontario to investigate and the Ontario Provincial Police are taking a second look at Olivier's accusation that he was offered a job to step aside for Thibeault. The Elections Act prohibits bribery and inducing someone not to run by offering them ?an office or employment.?

Wynne says they didn't do that and an initial OPP probe agreed. But then Olivier released the damning tapes of conversations with Sorbora and Lougheed.

Wynne, incredibly, says the tapes absolve Liberals of wrongdoing. Really? She says they ?vindicated? Sorbora of ?the false allegations? and that, well, even if Lougheed made an offer ?Lougheed is not government or Liberal Party staff, he speaks for himself.?

Actually, the tapes record Lougheed, a Sudbury Liberal organizer, saying to Olivier ?I come to you on behalf of the premier ... to ask you if you would consider stepping aside and more than that, nominating him (Thibeault).?... In the course of that deliberation the premier wants to talk to you ... They would like to present options in terms of appointments, jobs, whatever, that you and her and Pat Sorbora could talk about.?

To show that he wasn't just speaking ?for himself? as Wynne claims, Sorbora did phone Olivier as Lougheed promised. He told Olivier that Wynne ?is quite desperate ? desperate in a good way ? to get that seat back ... we should have the broader discussion about what is it that you'd be most interested in doing ... whether it's a full-time or part-time job in a constit (constituency) office, whether it is appointments, supports or commissions, whether it is also going on the exec (party executive), there are lots ...?

Ah yes, innocent as the driven snow. Hah

