

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Guessing outcome is sheer folly

Fiinally, they're off.

After several months of unofficial electioneering by all three major parties, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stopped campaigning just long enough on the weekend to make it official ? Oct. 19.

The good news is that they'll now be spending party money ? although a good part of that is subsidized by taxpayers ? instead of campaigning with direct tax money.

The bad news is, you can expect to be constantly bombarded by election ads and political speeches for the next 11 weeks, about double the normal length of these things.

The public opinion polls have long suggested this could be the first real three-way election campaign in a long time, with both the Tories and NDP seemingly at or near the top and the Liberals trailing but far from out of it.

You'll recall that when Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau first took over his struggling party he vaulted to the head of the class ? according to the polls and the pundits, that is ? but a series of stupid mistakes and a serious lack of, well, being serious about policy, have seen him sinking like the proverbial stone for some time.

NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, on the other hand, who must have been really ticked at the early Trudeau rave reviews ? since he actually appears to have substance, while Trudeau, beyond a natural charm and his Hollywood looks, has little to offer ? has recently gone on a run upwards in the polls to the point where some political pundits (particularly those who can't stand Harper) think he can become Canada's first NDP prime minister.

As for Harper, well, this is his fifth national campaign, and like any politician who has been around this long, he's created a lot of enemies in the process. Then again, as the saying goes, he's generally not creating many new enemies, but is simply confirming the bias of the large number of Canadians who have never liked him.

Since the Tories have a far larger war chest than either the NDP or the Liberals, there is little doubt that a longer campaign favors Harper, giving him far more time to spend some of those millions demonizing his main opponents. Until now, most of the Tory ads were aimed at Trudeau ? ?he's just not ready? ? but now they'll set their sights on Mulcair, a leader who, despite (or perhaps because of) his rise in the polls has had very little personal scrutiny from a generally sympathetic media.

That will change. He may soon have to explain how he intends to pay for the plethora of grand national schemes he is promising. Worse, he may also have to convince the rest of Canada outside of Quebec ? his home province ? why he believes that a vote of 50 percent-plus-one vote in a referendum would be enough to split the country (contrary to the Supreme Court view of a ?clear majority?) while his own party's constitution calls for a two-thirds vote to change.

He may also be asked to explain how he plans to lead the country while holding a dual citizenship with France, a practice that former NDP leader Jack Layton found unacceptable ? and unCanadian ? when he ran against then Liberal leader Stephane Dion, who also was a dual Canada-France citizen. Interesting.

As for Harper, people like him or they don't. But politics being what it is, even some who don't like him will end up voting for him on the rather common basis that they see the other two as less attractive alternatives.

Some point to the recent NDP win in Alberta as a sign that change is definitely in the air. If this is true then one assumes that Mulcair, more so than Trudeau, would be the main beneficiary.

Unfortunately for those who cling to this theory, however, it is rarely possible to compare results in provincial elections with those in federal. Just look at Ontario. For years when the Tories held power at Queen's Park, Ontarians voted in far more Liberals to Ottawa than they did Tories. Now with the Liberals holding sway at Queen's Park, the Tories have prospered federally in Ontario far beyond the numbers they enjoyed when their provincial counterparts held power. And so it goes.

Guessing the outcome of a campaign at this stage is sheer folly. History has shown that campaigns do matter.

Certainly the Tories, with a strong majority and lots of cash going in, could win. But so too could the NDP, at least a minority, if Mulcair runs a good campaign (something he hasn't been tested on yet.)

If pundits or anybody else really knew how it would turn out we could simply ask them and save all this hassle.

But that's not the way it works.

