

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Result shouldn't be ignored

As any political junkie can tell you, people can ? and often do ? make far too much out of the results of byelections.

After all, since the fate of the ruling government normally does not hang in the balance, it's a great way to send the message that you're not overjoyed by the government's performance.

That being said, however, it doesn't mean that byelection results should be completely ignored.

Premier Kathleen Wynne seems to get that when, responding to the loss of a ?safe? Liberal seat in Scarborough-Rouge River last week, she said, ?I understand, as do my ministers, that the government needs to focus on helping people with their everyday expenses.?

The problem, of course, that it is precisely the burden on those ?everyday expenses? piled on by successive Liberal governments that has caused Wynne to sink to her lowest approval ratings ever. And, barring a miracle ? or, more likely, an extraordinarily stupid election campaign by the Tories ? her days may indeed be numbered.

There is little at this stage that Wynne can do about the major irritants, particularly the unconscionable hikes in electricity rates, the product of wild-eyed and grossly ineffective alternative energy routes. These rates have not only hurt every homeowner and renter in the province, they've also contributed substantially to the exodus of manufacturing jobs, all of which has helped to make Ontario ? once the mighty engine of the entire country ? one of the least desirable places to locate.

Just two years ago, for example, Liberal Bas Balkissoon easily retained the riding (which had been Liberal since its creation in 1999) with 39 per cent of the vote. The byelection was caused because Balkissoon ? suddenly, and with no public explanation, stepped down ? and Tory Raymond Cho, a Toronto councillor who had finished a distant third in 2014, won about 39 per cent, leaving Liberal Piragal Thiru 10 points behind, a remarkable turnaround in such a short time.

Keep in mind that a previous byelection in Whitby-Oshawa also went to the Tories despite Wynne's personal campaigning and the importation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau just two days before the vote.

Ontarians may, for the moment anyway, like Trudeau. But it seems they're not fond of Wynne, and getting less fond all the time. A recent Forum Research poll, for example, found an embarrassing 16 per cent of respondents approved of her current performance as premier.

Keep in mind also that Cho's easy win in Scarborough-Rouge River came despite a torrent of news stories, columns and editorials in the days leading up to the vote, castigating Tory Leader Patrick Brown for a letter sent out under his name promising to revoke Wynne's sex education programs, only to have Brown renounce the letter and say he has no intention of doing that.

In normal circumstances, a gaffe of that nature would have hurt Brown with the electorate, but it seems many voters have decided that even a stumbling Brown is preferable to an arrogant and out-of-touch Wynne.

Speaking of the mainstream media, it was bemusing to see much of the coverage of the byelection focussed less on an impressive Tory victory and more on the fact that the controversial Etobicoke politician Doug Ford ?whose late brother Rob was, of course, an even more controversial mayor ? was heavily involved in helping Cho's campaign gain traction, acting as co-chair of that campaign. Media of all political stripes wanted to know if Brown has any plans for Ford to run in the next election.

While most of the media have long refused to recognize the fact, the Fords, yes even with their well-documented foibles, have long had a huge following among Toronto voters, and should Ford decide to contest the next provincial election as part of Brown's team it will give editorialists much to rant about but also garner a hell of a lot of votes for Brown and the Tories.

The Tories, of course, should have won the previous election, but for some unknown reason ? perhaps just sheer stupidity ? they decided suddenly to campaign on getting rid of 100,000 public servants, thereby, in one foul swoop, turning the focus of the campaign from Liberal incompetence to an absurd Tory promise. Wynne, instead of being on the defensive, as she should have been, was suddenly handed an issue she could have only dreamt about.

Many years before that, when current Toronto Mayor John Tory was head of the provincial party, he did the same favour for then Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty, by inexplicably announcing a plan to fund all school systems in the province, again turning the focus off Liberal malfeasance and onto Tory inanity.

It may be that Brown's gaffe over the sex ed thing shows that he too can be as pathetic as his predecessors and snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

It's not likely, but it's possible. Stay tuned.

