

National Affairs, Claire Hoy ? Mulcair was the only loser

There I was staring at my laptop in Whitehorse, Yukon ? temporarily distracted by a bald eagle soaring by outside ? trying to find results for the four federal by-elections when, like many Canadians, I learned that Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau was the big winner.

Indeed, a Canadian Press story filed not long before all the votes were counted ? and remember, CP is allegedly our ?neutral? news source ? I was astounded to learn that not only had Trudeau's Liberals won two ridings in Toronto (one of which had been heavily Liberal forever; the other clearly a victory for a strong local candidate), but I was informed that Trudeau's supposed magical qualities had extended even into Alberta, where Liberal has been a four-letter word since Justin's father Pierre imposed the National Energy Program decades ago.

The CP story breathlessly reported that in Fort MacMurray, where all the Tory candidate normally has to do is put his name on the ballot, the Tory had just ?eked? out victory, surely a positive sign for Liberals in the next federal election.

?Eked?? The Tory had 49 percent of the vote, 14 points ahead of the Liberal. To be sure, it was a better Liberal showing than the last election, but it's the first time in my decades of covering politics I'd ever seen a candidate win nearly half the vote and been categorized as ?eking? out a victory.

Next day, checking all the mainline newspapers across the country, I was further informed that Trudeau was the big winner and Prime Minister Stephen Harper really should consider getting out while the getting is good, pretty much the same theme as the previous round of by-elections where the Tories, again, held onto their seats.

This is what passes for good journalism these days: the theme: Trudeau the Younger is new, fresh, and exciting; Harper the Veteran is old hat, crusty and unpopular. Therefore, Trudeau is clearly on his way to becoming our next prime minister.

But is this true? Well, we won't know for sure until the next election, but based on the results of the last two rounds of by-elections, it's a pretty shaky scenario.

Yes, Trudeau's Liberals have done well. But so have the Tories. They keep winning all their current seats. And if they do that ? arithmetic being what it is ? they'll win the next election, too.

The real story isn't that that Harper is under duress ? since the actual election results completely debunk this theory ? but that NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair is in serious danger of being displaced as Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition by Trudeau.

It's the NDP who are getting squeezed by the Liberals, not the Tories, a factual reality which the media is generally ignoring in their rush to paint Harper ? a guy they don't like ? as yesterday's man.

One of the few mainline journalists who offered fact-based analysis of the by-election results was Chris Selley in the Saturday's National Post. Responding to the widely reported Liberal electoral surge under Trudeau, Selley actually added up the Liberal votes cast and compared them with the Liberal votes in the last election and found the total Liberal vote increased by ? wait for it ? 67 votes.

?Certainly there is nothing in Monday's results to discourage Liberals,? writes Selley. ?Or to argue against the notion that Trudeau is selling something Canadians want to buy. But if Canadians don't actually buy it ? i.e. if they don't vote ? that hardly matters.?

Much has been made of the Liberal increase in Alberta, but an honest reading debunks the notion of a Trudeau surge. Yes, they gained share in percentage terms, but that was primarily because the voter turnout hit record lows; i.e. voters, who are overwhelmingly Tory, knew their guy would win so why bother showing up. That allowed the anti-Tory vote, such as it is, to appear stronger. Even then, it still wasn't close.

In Scarborough, where Liberals have cake-walked for years, they did it again. Here too, their vote total dropped 6,000 from 2011, largely from a low turnout, but still not a strong indication of a new Trudeaumania sweeping the land.

Of the four by-elections, only one really meant something, and that was city councillor Adam Vaughan's convincing Liberal win over the NDP in Trinity-Spadina, a long-time NDP stronghold vacated when by Olivia Chow, the late Jack Layton's wife, decided to run for Toronto's mayor. Here again, it was more likely Vaughan's popularity than any supposed Trudeau magic that did it.

The truth is, after two rounds of by-elections, the so-called Orange Wave has been washed away. The NDP is hurting, not the Tories. Harper is holding his seats ? a rarity for governments in by-elections ? but Mulcair is losing to the Liberals.

It may not be as exciting to write about a second-place battle, but, based on actual voting results so far, it sure is a lot more honest.

