

## A spring election? Maybe in 2015

AS WE SEE IT, all signs point to a spring election in Ontario, but not this spring.

Despite the TV commercials showing Premier Kathleen Wynne running through Caledon, and despite her suggestions that she is ready to fight one if her Liberal government's budget gets defeated, the only way that would happen would be if NDP Leader Andrea Horwath orders her troops to join with Opposition Leader Tim Horwath's Progressive Conservatives in voting the budget down. And for a couple of reasons, that isn't likely to happen.

One reason lies in recent polling. Although some of the opinion polls show the Hudak Tories well in the lead, with about 38 of the respondents saying they'd vote PC and others show the Tories and Liberals in a virtual tie, all recent samplings of public opinion show a drop-off in support for the NDP.

Meanwhile, in terms of personalities, both female party leaders are doing well while Mr. Hudak trails his party, and in the wake of the recent funeral of Jim Flaherty a lot of Tory supporters must be wishing Christine Elliott had won the PC leadership. (And wouldn't that have been amazing to have all three parties led by a woman?)

In the circumstances, Ms. Horwath must see an election this spring as likely leading to a PC government ? whether a majority or minority one ? with her party's byelection wins being seen as of little consequence.

The other reason would be that all signs now point to the 2014-15 budget document including measures designed to garner NDP support and PC opposition, with the government putting jobs and the economy ahead of budget-balancing.

Interestingly, all commentators in the ?mainstream media? see the choice for the NDP as one between support of a government that continues to be enmeshed in the scandal over gas plant cancellations, and defeat of the government to force a snap election.

As we see it, there is a third course that may well appeal to the NDP leader and her caucus, something akin to neutrality.

One option would be for Ms. Horwath to permit a free vote among her members, confident that just enough would support the budget or be absent from the vote to ensure a razor-thin victory for the Wynne forces. Yet another option would be for her to announce support for the budget in principle while demanding some changes in committee. One such change would be a measure designed to prevent any future government from staging a sequel to the gas plant fiasco.

As we see it, that could be achieved by returning power planning to a resurrected Ontario Hydro, with long-term planning being de-politicized and new projects required to be submitted to public hearings of the sort that apparently never took place concerning the projects in Oakville and ?Mississauga.

Assuming the budget, due to be tabled today, does pass, there's little doubt that pressure will build for an election roughly a year from now, despite the fact provincial law provides for one in October 2015.

One reason is that governments have tended to do better in spring elections. Another is that by then Ms. Wynne may finally have distanced her government from the McGuinty era.

However, a third and potentially determining factor is that the next federal election is scheduled for October 19, 2015, in accordance with the Canada Elections Act which requires that a general election be held on the third Monday of October in the fourth calendar year following the last general election.

No one surely wants simultaneous federal and provincial election campaigns.