

# Cohn: Balancing act for NDP's Andrea Horvath

Mark Regg Cohn - Sep 24, 2011

If Ontario's election were about barbecues, we would have a winner.

NDP Leader Andrea Horvath is first choice for voters when asked which party leader they'd invite over to grill ribs. And she is no slouch about beer, having slung lagers as a waitress to put herself through university.

It's hard not to like Horvath. She has an infectious laugh and enjoys mainstreeting with voters, shedding the protective cocoons of her rivals.

But if she is winning the popularity contest, she is trailing in the race to be premier — and to be seen as one — when voters are asked who is best qualified for the job. Despite an increase in NDP support to its traditional range of about 23 per cent, a Forum Research survey in Saturday's Star suggests a gain of only a few seats from the party's rock-bottom status (now 10 of 107 seats).

One scenario, however, looms large for the NDP: Holding the balance of power if neither the Liberals nor Tories win a majority.

It is a recurring role for the party, both provincially and federally. But if she is emerging as kingmaker at Queen's Park, Horvath is not about to telegraph her shopping list in advance.

Winging her way back to Toronto after a gruelling day on the campaign trail, Horvath remains coy.

"I'm not running to pick a new premier on Oct. 6 — I'm running to be the premier on Oct. 6," she tells me over the roar of the engines as her chartered Bearskin Airlines turboprop bounces through a rainstorm late at night.

"And that's all you're getting on this one!" she laughs hoarsely, fighting a sinus cold.

Fair enough — and a perfectly fine press line. It is an article of faith among NDP strategists that they must never discuss their price for propping up others, lest that preclude them from winning the main prize for themselves.

But can she not offer guidance to voters wondering whether she merits the responsibilities that minority entails?

Horwath replies that she will focus on three NDP priorities: Job creation, health care improvements, and affordability (HST reductions).

“If people want to know what role we’ll take — regardless of what mandate they give us on Oct. 6 — those are the things we’re going to focus on, those are the priorities we’re going to have in place, whether we are government or otherwise.”

Apart from press lines, there are lines in the sand she will try to draw in any negotiations.

Stopping corporate tax cuts is a major NDP demand after the last Liberal government started phasing in a reduction from 14 to 10 per cent. Yet there may be some common ground here. Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty previously opposed the corporate cuts he later implemented as premier.

The NDP’s appeal to pocketbook concerns often echoes the tax-fighting crusade of Tory Leader Tim Hudak. Horwath makes no apologies for her controversial proposal to reduce the HST on gas, which critics say will only reduce revenues for the social programs New Democrats hold dear.

“The taxation system has to be a fair one,” she shoots back. “I don’t believe the mantra of all taxes are good.”

I ask her about Hudak’s refusal to continue uploading municipal services that Mike Harris fobbed off on them years ago. The Tory solution is to rein in local labour costs by toughening up the arbitration system to factor in government cost-cutting.

Arbitration is sacrosanct for New Democrats, and Horwath bristles at the PC proposal: “I don’t think he’s being honest about it, to be frank with you. Mike Harris tried to do that, it was not successful. I think you have to be honest about what you can and can’t achieve.”

She stops short of declaring it a deal breaker, but it’s clear that Hudak’s plan would preclude her propping up the PCs.

The danger for Horwath is that voters seeking change — and a break on the HST — might gravitate to the Tories’ traditional tax-fighting message.

“If people want a real change, then they can look at who’s different from the status quo,” she counters. Walking me through the list, Horwath spices up her press lines with one obvious difference — “The way I would sit in the premier’s chair — with my legs crossed, in a skirt” — then erupts in laughter before catching herself. “Sorry!”

Her quip reminds me of an unscripted line last summer, when a reporter asked for more details about her party platform: “Look, I’m a woman. I know you don’t give it all up at once.”

It was a risqué line at the time, but she brought the house down. Playing coy remains a risky strategy now, as voters wonder about her price for propping up a minority government in the Legislature after Oct. 6.

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