

Cohn: The Ontario campaign begins today

Mark Regg Cohn - Sep 24, 2011

Here's something you may not have heard before:

An Ontario election is underway. And it starts in earnest today.

Until now, the campaign has barely cracked the front pages. Since the writ was dropped 2 ½ weeks ago, almost nothing has happened — and yet everything has happened.

Now, the race is being turned upside down.

The Forum poll published in today's Star shows that as voters belatedly start to focus on the campaign, a longstanding Tory lead has dissolved. We're headed for a photo finish — with the NDP holding the balance of power (but holding a lot less of it than many had thought).

For the next 12 days, brace yourself for one of the closest elections in recent Ontario history. And the possibility of regime change.

The drama comes not merely from the horse race. It's about who takes the reins of power after Oct. 6 and which direction they take us in the next day.

What happens next? A decisive chapter will be written Tuesday night when the three leaders walk into a TV studio for a province-wide debate that could determine whether Ontario is headed for minority government.

It will be the first (and only) prolonged exposure most voters get to Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath. Opposition politicians tend to toil in obscurity between provincial elections, but they are about to be introduced to Ontarians. And tested.

In a dry run on Friday, they appeared side by side in a cavernous banquet hall at a motel near Thunder Bay's airport. While past performance is no predictor of future conduct, the two-person debate showed how unforgiving the format can be — and revealing.

With Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty bizarrely boycotting this northern debate, the two opposition leaders politely played patty cake with one another while taking shots at the absent premier. McGuinty's decision to snub the north has cost the Liberals dearly in negative press coverage locally.

As high-handed as his decision was, he is hardly an unknown commodity after two terms as premier and three previous election debates. The real suspense will be over how the opposition tag team of Hudak and Horwath performs.

In their warm-up debate here Friday, Hudak dominated from the start, in command of the facts and showing a mastery of sound bites to get his message out. Speaking without notes, he assumed a premier-like persona while behaving respectfully toward Horwath.

Hudak worked the room like an old pro — no surprise considering he is a lifelong politician: “Andy, great question,” he started one response. “Thanks Ron, excellent question,” he began another. “Friends . . . you know me, you know where I come from.”

Smooth, if a little too smooth.

Horwath was also impressive — when reading her opening and closing texts (just well enough to draw a smile from her speaking coach in the audience). But during the freewheeling debate, she tensed up, stumbled, hesitated. There were no gaffes, just plodding language that couldn’t match Hudak’s more resonant pitches. She lapsed into recitations of boilerplate platform promises, leaving an impression that she was auditioning to be an opposition leader, not a premier-in-waiting.

They tried to outdo one another in an unseemly contest over who could be the tougher tax fighter, with Horwath at one point boasting the NDP would go further than the PCs by reducing the HST on gas.

If Hudak was the winner on the podium, Horwath’s uninspiring performance didn’t do him any favours. The open secret of the campaign is that the Tories need a strong NDP to suck votes away from the Liberals in key ridings on Oct. 6, and PC strategists were clearly disappointed that she seemed uneven despite the kid-glove treatment from Hudak onstage.

In losing their front-runner status, the Tories got gloomy tidings with today’s poll results. If the NDP campaign continues to lose momentum in the homestretch — and falters again on Tuesday — that will be more bad news for Hudak, no matter how well he performs.