

John Ivison: Mulcair in pole position heading into NDP debates



Darren Calabrese/National Post - Thomas Mulcair gets in line for a coffee before speaking at the University of Toronto Mississauga campus Tuesday.

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It's doubtful Stephen Harper would have wasted breath besmirching any NDP leadership candidate he did not think might face him across the aisle of the House of Commons after the New Democrats' convention in March. Hence, the Prime Minister got his retaliation in first on Thomas Mulcair over the tempest in a tea-pot controversy of the NDP candidate's dual citizenship. "I'm very clear. I'm a Canadian

and only a Canadian,” Mr. Harper said — a cheap shot that might not win him acclaim from the legions of dual citizens who voted Conservative at the last election.

The point is though, the Conservatives are coming around to the idea that Mr. Mulcair is most likely to be leader of the Official Opposition after the March 24 ballot. A new Forum Research poll for the *National Post* suggests that Mr. Mulcair is indeed the man to beat. The poll of 1,200 Canadians found nearly two-thirds didn’t know who would win — and presumably most couldn’t care less. Mr. Mulcair came out on top, almost certainly because of name recognition.

More telling was his performance among nearly 300 self-declared NDP voters, where he won 19% support, nearly double that of his closest rival, Peggy Nash (10%) and far ahead of Paul Dewar (6%) and Brian Topp (6%). This suggests his support extends beyond his Quebec bastion.

That the race is far from over is evident from the 48% of NDP supporters who say they haven’t yet made up their minds.

When those people are stripped out, Mr. Mulcair’s support rose to 36%, ahead of Ms. Nash’s 20% and 11% for both Mr. Dewar and Mr. Topp. (Romeo Saganash won 8%; Nathan Cullen 7%; Martin Singh 4% and Niki Ashton 3%). With such a small sample size, it should be noted that the margin of error is plus or minus 8%.

But while tracking polls and endorsements may not be scientific, they do indicate momentum. And in politics, as in economics, the Big Mo can take on a life of its own and drive events.

The website 308.com has come up with an endorsement ranking system that has Mr. Topp as the most heavily endorsed candidate, followed by Mr. Mulcair, Ms. Nash and Mr. Dewar. Yet most of Mr. Topp’s big name backers — Ed Broadbent, Roy Romanow et al — were unveiled early in the campaign, which now has the appearance of running out of gas, like Ben Johnson at the mid-way point in a marathon. The strategy seems to have been, to come out of the blocks hard and discourage other runners. Patently, that has not worked.

Mr. Mulcair has most caucus backing — 35 MPs, including, most recently, Don Davies from B.C. Senior Conservatives relish the idea of a Mulcair win, since they consider him “wedge-able” but Liberal delegates at last week’s convention acknowledged that victory for the Montreal MP would set back their hopes of recovery in Quebec.

Ms. Nash, with her plan to “push and challenge” markets, has won the backing of six MPs.

Mr. Dewar pulled off a coup last week by unveiling Alberta MP Linda Duncan and popular Ontario MP, Charlie Angus, as a key supporters. He also has the backing of one third of the Manitoba provincial caucus. The Ottawa MP held back his endorsements until after Christmas and is now building a head of steam. He remains the one many Conservatives would not like to face, given his lack of obvious “negatives.”

Mr. Cullen revealed his first caucus support Wednesday, receiving backing from fellow B.C. caucus members Alex Atamanenko and Fin Donnelly.

As we enter debate season, with five official tilts, in addition to unofficial debates such as the one in Toronto Wednesday, Mr. Mulcair looks to be in pole position. Yet he remains a polarizing figure and all of the front-runners will have to be wary of alienating their rivals in the remainder of the campaign. As one senior NDP figure put it: "Second choices are going to be important. After all they will be someone else's first choice."

My take on this race is that it will come down to a battle between the pragmatists versus the ideologues, with Mr. Mulcair, Mr. Dewar and Mr. Cullen in the first camp, and Mr. Topp and Ms. Nash in the latter. If Mr. Mulcair can't secure enough second votes to push him over the top, then look to Mr. Dewar to take it. New Democrats may have their head in the clouds, but enough of them have their feet in the ballot box to suggest the pragmatists will take it.

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