

Kathleen Wynne's opponents are winning the provincial election for her so far

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

I never thought I'd ever say this, but I am beginning to feel sorry for Tim Hudak.

There is the provincial Tory leader, slowly edging his way back up in public favour, albeit mostly because the Liberal brand took another gas plant scandal hit, and Rob Ford has another episode.

I call it that because Mr. Ford clearly has a big problem and it was only a matter of time before another video emerged showing new evidence of that problem and fresh insight into his character. And it wasn't pretty.

Mr. Hudak, whose only chance of getting into power in Ontario depends on courting what has become known as "Ford Nation", was inevitably asked by the media for his response to the latest Ford meltdown and he blew it.

And if you need proof of that look at the pages of the *Toronto Sun*. It lambasted the Tory leader for his washy-washy reaction.

When "the nation's" largest news source turns its back on the provincial leader who should be its first choice for endorsement in the coming Ontario election, that has to be bad news.

To its credit, *the Sun* has already (more or less) wiped its hands of its golden boy, thus ending forever Mr. Ford's hopes for re-election as mayor. And it may yet send its readers to Mr. Hudak's camp when the election day looms but its criticism of him is merely adding to the reasons to question his credentials to be premier. If he doesn't have the smarts to respond suitably to a softball media question about Rob Ford how on earth will he turn Ontario's economy around?

He might get away with all this if he had a bit more pizzazz as an individual. But he doesn't. It's not his fault, but it does mean he needs to work a little harder in the other areas.

Andrea Horvath continues to be a mystery. The NDP leader turns down the most progressive budget we have seen since Bob Rae's time as Ontario Premier (much to the chagrin of her traditional union allies) and then disappears on the day when everyone is looking for her.

That was just weird, and really doesn't help her image in the potential premier credentials department. She had to know what to be in the budget (there were enough leaks to fill a reservoir) so why on earth did she play hide 'n' seek when she had a chance to set the tone for an election, if that's what she wanted?

If Kathleen Wynne wins another minority government after the June election, she will have done so through no great strategic master strokes, so much as a lack of them from her opponents.

After a pretty good start politically, she hasn't been all that inspiring but she hasn't made any huge errors either.

The ghost of McGuinty Past has been a drag on her numbers but, deep down, I suspect most people don't hold his scandals against her.

All the talk about the importance of transit is good but no one really believes there is commitment on that file from any of the parties so I don't see it as winning an election. It could lose one if the others can play the "tax game" successfully however but I am not sure they can. One way or another, "we" are going to have to pay to fix gridlock, but I am starting to believe that the whole anti-tax mantra is starting to lose its appeal. Most people are smarter than that now.

The provincial pension plan is a highlight however, and it will likely be the one thing that separates Ms Wynne and her Liberals from the others. A lot of folks have quiet fears about their retirement and this is a very "clutchable" straw for them. And Stephen Harper's attempt to butt into the campaign and portray it as another tax is typical of the dated attack strategy the Tories have used for years. If Mr. Hudak tries the same line it will merely show he has nothing original to offer, other than his supposed million jobs plan. Maybe he should invent a "secure pension plan".

If the anti-tax strategy is successful in June and the Liberals fall, expect more of the same in the fall of 2015. If, as I suspect, it fails, the Tories will need a new playbook for the federal election.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)