

No change at the top, but there will be room for new players elsewhere

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

The new year began with Stephen Harper, Kathleen Wynne and Karen Farbridge heading the three governments that we vote and pay for. The year will end the same way.

While many would dearly love to see Mr. Harper go, I don't think his ego will allow it to happen this year. I think instead that the agonizingly slow unfolding of the palace coup in the Conservative ranks will become gradually more obvious and Mr. Harper will signal his departure in early 2015. That will leave plenty of time for a replacement to be found and for that replacement to find his or her sea legs before the fall election.

Clearly, the prime minister has not had a lot of fun in the past 12 months, and I don't expect this year to be much of an improvement. At some point the fall-out from the Senate scandal will reach him and the robocalls affair will see some kind of resolution that will further place him and his party in a bad light. There is no way Stephen Harper would allow himself to be beaten in an election, especially one including someone called Trudeau, hence he will decide to go and let someone else take the fall.

This spring at Queen's Park, we will likely see the end of the propping up of Kathleen Wynne's Liberals by Andrea Horwath's New Democrats. That would be good news for the provincial Tories, not because they have a snowball's chance in Hades of winning an election, but because their leader will be replaced shortly after. Also, the government will still be a minority and they won't have to wait too long to give his replacement a chance to find his or her sea legs. (If this sounds like a time of Tory transition, that's because it will be.)

It will all depend on the first few months of the year. While I think the gas plants scandal is more or less a dead horse, the Liberals really must find an issue that grabs people's imagination and sets them apart from their record. Acknowledging and paying for a sound transportation policy is one way it could happen; the other is following up on the idea of a made-in-Ontario enhanced pension plan. Given the continuing shakiness of the economy (or, at least, the absence or robustness) fear of future financial insecurity is quietly gnawing away at a lot of people's sense of stability. A bold move to address

those fears, and the chance to fight with the federal government might be just the ticket, even if it does mean people paying a little more out of each pay cheque.

At the local level, we will see this fall the departure of some high profile faces from the council horseshoe and the return of a much-loved face.

Cam Guthrie will give Mayor Karen Farbridge a much better and certainly more organized fight than David Birtwistle did four years ago, but he will lose.

There are always grumpy people who will vote for anyone except the current administration and most of those votes will go to Mr. Guthrie. The remaining rump of hard-right Tory voters will perhaps get together and form Guthrie Nation, but it won't be enough.

While his experience is limited, Mr. Guthrie has shown great talent for getting his name in the paper. Ironically, that very quality may be enough to have some voters write him off as a headline-grabber rather than a serious contender. Those voters will go to the current mayor.

Karen Farbridge will be the touchstone for how the voters are feeling and absent any great scandals in the coming months, there is no deal-breaker out there to bring her down. Taxes have gone up a bit but not really by much. There is clearly a lot happening in this town and generally people like to see that. She will win.

I'll get into the council race later in the year but given that Cathy Downer was liked by all sides of the political spectrum before her return as a Ward Five councillor is a no brainer. We can also expect to see the names of some other familiar old warhorses' on the candidate list but none as well-respected as Ms Downer, and none as likely to be elected.

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