

These are heady times for political junkies, but we're still a pretty small, and irrelevant bunch

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

I was in the bar at a conference the other day, looking forward to shooting the breeze with colleagues after a couple of weeks of what had been an absolute feast of juicy political news.

The switch from Tory blue to NDP orange in Alberta, a Tory majority in the UK election, ongoing revelations from the Mike Duffy trial highlighting major interference in Senate affairs by the Prime Minister's Office. Plus, we had the PM's knowledge that Duffy was not living in Prince Edward Island when appointed as that province's senator and a major security breach by the prime minister's public relations department. Then we had the election of what appears to be a hard right Tory candidate in Ontario's leadership race, and a hard separatist for the Parti Quebecois.

Where do you start?

As it turned out, I had barely begun my impersonation of Kathleen Wynne dancing in the street, when the reaction from most of the folks at the table suggested they were not really that interested. If politics got anywhere near the conversation it was related to our main national pastime -- sports.

Being ill-equipped to contribute in these areas, I headed to bed early and probably felt better the next morning as a result.

I have been an avowed political junkie since I first voted at the age of 18 in a London municipal election. There were 30 names on the ballot sheet because all sorts of new parties had been formed to advocate for specific causes, or to highlight the foolishness of the whole business. Among them were the Homes Before Roads Party, the Raving Loony Party and the Bread and Circuses Party.

It didn't take me long to get hooked on politics again after moving to Canada in 1978, and this addiction was only made worse when I became a journalist in the early 1980s. And while most of my income now comes from other sources of employment I continue to write on a regular basis and politics at all levels continues to fascinate.

And continues to make me humble.

I was convinced Christine Elliott, a softer conservative than her opponent, and thus much better placed to challenge Ms Wynne in 2018, would win by a mile. But the new

voting system used in the leadership contest proved a major benefit to Patrick Brown. He was clearly much savvier on the whole niche audience marketing game and a whiz with social media. So a policy on sex education brought in by the majority provincial Liberal Government, and strongly supported by most Ontarions, by all accounts, was used as a lightning rod by Mr. Brown. He stirred up the socially conservative new Canadian vote and added that to the more traditionally-minded rural PC attitudes. That pushed him over the top in the leadership race with the Tory establishment's choice, Ms Elliott.

I was also convinced that Jim Prentice would do well in Alberta and be seen as a strong candidate to succeed Stephen Harper. (This humble pie is delicious...)

It was clear from the polls that Jim Prentice was in trouble, but trouble for PCs in the prairies usually means a reduced majority, not a rout. It was also interesting to note that some observers pointed out the NDP won the right to govern with only 40-odd per cent of the vote, as if this were a new thing. Stephen Harper and many governments before him have been handed the keys on lesser mandates. (Why is it that it is only when the little guys win with less than half the vote, that our first-past-the-post electoral system is suddenly an issue again?)

There is always a lot to speculate about and this is where politics is like sports. We can all have an opinion; we're often wrong; we're sometimes right. But that's enough to continue the speculation.

While it may be a depressing reality for political pundits, let's face it, it is the millions who spend their time mostly on sports speculation that decide elections. In a democracy it will always be this way.

And if politicians don't behave with more honour and show more relevance to everyday life, that will likely not change.

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