

We could have a horse race this October, but it's too early to name the favourite

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By Ben Bennett

You have to give Gloria Kovach credit. As the local Conservative candidate this fall, she has taken on the job of applying lipstick to a pig with serious beauty challenges. But she might just be the one person who can do it.

After a 2011 federal election that surely left a bad taste in everyone's mouth, left or right, it was with a sense of relief that local Liberal (and terrific MP) Frank Valeriote was re-elected. The tone of the campaign run by the local conservatives was disturbing. We saw petty politicking, selective attendance at all-candidates meetings by the candidate, a lack of courtesy to debate organizers and a disdain of the media that was as consistent as it was troubling.

But based on what was happening at the national level, it fit right in. So we don't know how much of the unpleasantness was some kind of campaign strategy dictated by the upper Tory echelons, but it was not nice. And the tone of letters to the editor in the past four years suggest their failed candidate was left with a significant chip on his shoulder.

As a leftie tree-hugger, I may have opposing views to traditional conservatives on many issues but I have found them as a group to be generally courteous and well-mannered. So the whole tone of nastiness in 2011 must have made even stalwart Tory supporters uncomfortable.

And this was before the robo-calls affair and other scandals broke that clearly revealed organized and conscious efforts by some to subvert our very democracy (which is actually much scarier than bad manners on the hustings).

We may never know who was responsible and how far the campaign of disinformation extended last election day but if anyone believes it was all down to one over-enthusiastic staffer, barely out of school, I have some land in Florida you may want to look at. There is a very bad smell still lingering over the Tory brand. The question is whether enough people remember, or care.

If she is able to overcome the baggage, Ms Kovach may have a sense of déjà vu this time around. The last time she ran there was a new Liberal candidate, a high profile New Democrat and a highly popular Green candidate with lots of momentum.

This time she faces a new Liberal candidate, and a well-known social justice advocate for the NDP and a high profile, albeit not local Green candidate.

In 2008, with four strong candidates, the common wisdom was that a percentage vote in the high 20s might be enough, given our first-past-the post system. In the end, after what had been a by-election morphed into a general election, Frank Valeriote took 32% for the Liberals, Ms. Kovach garnered 29%, Mike Nagy won 21% for the Greens and Tom King won 16% of the vote for the NDP.

The pollsters always tell us that fewer than 10% of a candidate's votes are for the actual candidate; the vast majority vote for the party, or the leader.

The past results here suggest that wasn't the case for Mr. Valeriote, who added substantially to his vote count in 2011 while his Liberal colleagues elsewhere fell like nine-pins (although the strong Tory vote was in line with an improved Conservative performance nation-wide).

This time, we may well see a Kovach factor boost the Tory vote, and perhaps a dip in Liberal fortunes with Mr. Valeriote's name no longer on the ballot. Both these possibilities however need to be a balanced against the overall Tory/Liberal and Harper/Trudeau performances. And with Tom Mulcair's current momentum, Andrew Seagram could see a nice boost if that continues, bringing the NDP back in the game.

While the spectre of strategic voting is always a problem, the Greens have shown they can bring a 20+% vote to the table, based on Mr. Nagy in 2008 and Mike Schreiner, provincially, last year. A strong performance from Gord Miller, backed up by a few local Green waves elsewhere, could lessen that threat and make it a real horse race.

If people locally were to vote with their convictions rather than to ensure someone they don't want gets in, it could be very close, indeed.

And after what happened in Alberta, all bets are off.

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