

Ken Dryden's got it right

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A12 BRITT DYSART COMMENTARY

Ken Dryden is a smart man, and as expected he shone some rays of enlightenment on this federal election race during a campaign stop in Fredericton this week.

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File

Ken Dryden, Liberal candidate for York Centre, addresses a gathering of Liberals at the Crown Plaza Hotel in Fredericton on Wednesday. During the campaign stop, the hockey great criticized what he calls Tory leader Stephen Harper's simplistic view of the country.

During his goaltending days Dryden was almost always the coolest, calmest player on the ice, a necessary trait if you're going to backstop your team to six Stanley Cups during your NHL career.

That demeanor has not changed much in his approach to politics. Dryden has always been more inclined to have a reasoned debate than bang a shoe on his desk.

But sometimes you have to drop your gloves, which is exactly what Dryden did in a speech that was a searing criticism of Stephen Harper and his policies, or lack thereof.

Dryden pointed to funding cuts to the arts, aboriginal programs, women's groups, health, childcare, poverty and disability groups.

"If it quacks like a duck, put a blue vest on it, it's still a duck," he quipped.

I'm not sure if Dryden was aware it was the opening day of duck season in New Brunswick when he spoke, but it was a point well-made.

More to the point was the characterization of Harper's desire to make this a "Seinfeld" campaign, a campaign about nothing. The debate to date has been about Dion's vision of Canada while Harper's designs for the country are at best murky.

Another fair comment. The key messages coming from Tory candidates in New Brunswick are lighter than big fluffy pillows. They make vague pronouncements about leadership and a steady hand without really defining what that means.

The trouble with this approach is that candidates are allowed to get away with it. We, collectively as voters, let them get away with it.

Elections used to be about stump speeches and whistle stops and fiery debates. For some reason these days voters, and to an extent pundits and the media are obsessed with one thing. The almighty poll.

There was a time when the media was cool to polling and pollsters, but you can't swing a cat these days without running into another story about polls. There are myriad polling firms tracking voter intentions night to night. There are websites dedicated to dissecting these polls into projected seat counts. The statistical accuracy of a national survey of 1,000 or so Canadians being extrapolated into a prediction of who wins a particular seat in New Brunswick is farcical.

But it's still a lot of fun to look at the red, blue and orange map on the computer screen every morning.

Different polls taken the same day give us different results, so it also becomes a game of which poll do you believe. Nick Nanos has been criticized by some for being too kind to the Liberals, but a recent Canwest news story pointed to the firm's methodology. Nanos asks an open ended "who are you voting for" question, as opposed to "pick a, b, c or d." The firm also calls cellphones, giving them access to a younger demographic.

Then there's the mysterious so-called "internal poll," such as the one craftily floated by a Tory operative earlier this week.

The poll is not released, only alluded to in vague terms that best suit the needs of the anonymous source. With any luck, it makes the front page and one party cringes while the other one smirks.

Under the Canada Election Act, there are actual rules governing how polls are reported during an election campaign. They include such things as disclosing who conducted a poll, how many people were contacted, where they were from, the wording of the question, the margin of error and whether the poll was conducted using recognized statistical methods.

While there are rules, the media tends to treat them as guidelines. Some stories do a better job of toeing the line than others, but few stories actually comply with the rules to the letter.

The result all of this is that we become wrapped up in numbers and argue about whether it's better to have a 10 point lead with a margin of error of two, or an eight-point lead with a margin of error of five. The pundits speak breathlessly about momentum while issues become an afterthought.

That's why it's so easy for Stephen Harper to go whistling past the graveyard of a floundering economy in this national campaign.

The trouble is, poll-watchers are viewing the election campaign as if it was a televised poker tournament, all the while trying to figure out who's got the hot hand on any given day.

Ken Dryden is right: we need to pay more attention to the issues before it's too late. All this having been said, I have to confess to watching the polls from time to time.

It was awfully nice to see the polls tighten somewhat in the Liberals' favour this week. In these poll-crazed times, momentum can be a very good thing.



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In between elections Canadians across the country complain that politicians are shallow, disrespectful, untrustworthy and unruly especially during Question Period. Now that we can choose an honest guy with progressive ideas and a vision (Dion) we complain that he can't communicate! As usual, we'll get the government we deserve. Too bad.

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