

Dark clouds in Trudeau Grits? future?

JUST WHAT, IF ANYTHING, should we make of two big Liberal losses, in the June 7 Ontario election and last Monday's byelection in the Quebec riding of Chicoutimi-Le Fjord?

In the Ontario election, the Grits almost disappeared, winning just seven of the 124 seats, while in the byelection Conservative candidate Richard Martel captured 52.7 per cent of the vote, more than 5,000 votes ahead of Liberal Lina Boivin, who took 29.5 per cent.

One reason for the Ontario result was the 15-year reign of the Liberals, which left them seemingly tired and out of appealing new ideas, but a lot may have been due to the populist tactics of Premier-Designate Doug Ford, who managed to promise a lot without saying how he could do it without ballooning the province's future budget deficits.

As for the byelection, some of the reason may be the personal popularity of Mr. Martel, coach of the fabled Chicoutimi Saguenéens.

It's hard to read much from a byelection result, but in this case the one thing that came loud and clear was that the New Democratic Party is in trouble in Quebec. After coming within 600 votes of winning Chicoutimi-Le Fjord in the 2015 federal election, the NDP candidate garnered only nine per cent of the votes.

The Liberals may well have been hoping they would benefit from the hard line they have been taking in the face of Donald Trump's imposition of tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum, with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau having won opposition praise for his tough stance against them.

But while recent public opinion polls show that roughly 50 per cent of Canadians approve of the PM's conduct, they also show the Conservatives and Liberals in a virtual tie nationally.

As we see it, the federal Liberals should be more than a little concerned at the possibility they won't win a second term in the October 2019 vote, and should immediately look seriously at Mr. Trudeau's pledge that the 2015 election would be the last in which all those elected would have been simply the 'first past the post.'

As matters stand, the government is almost certain to lose seats in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, with the Conservatives beneficiaries in the East and the NDP in B.C., thanks to local opposition to the Trans-Mountain pipeline expansion and the Liberals' lack of hope for any compensating seats in Alberta.

However, the overriding factor determining the election result will undoubtedly be the state of Canada's economy.

If the bullying demagogue in Washington has his way and the architect of America First proceeds with tariffs on Canadian-built cars and trucks (and who knows what else), Canada's economy will obviously be in a shambles and the Liberals will take the blame.

On the other hand, if Trudeau & Co. can somehow manage to preserve some semblance of free trade from either a renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or a new bilateral agreement of the sort now being proposed by the Trump administration, the steel and aluminum tariffs should disappear and our economy should prosper.

With so much uncertainty, the Liberals should be taking a close look at both the federal electoral map and the Ontario election results to see the benefits that might result from a change in the electoral law designed to ensure that every riding is represented by someone supported by a majority of the voters.

That would be possible if the law required run-off votes in any riding where the candidate who finished first failed to secure a majority of the votes, the run-offs being between the top two finishers.

Our suspicion is that such run-offs would have resulted in a few more seats for Ontario's opposition parties in the new legislature, which together won about 60 per cent of the popular vote but only 48 of the 124 ridings.