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Could this be 1934 all over again?

EDITORIAL

THE WRIT HASN'T BEEN dropped, but for all intents and purposes the 2018 Ontario election campaign is under way, and we're facing a five-week deluge of pledges and criticisms, with two parties decrying the populism they see in the leading party's leader.

For nearly all of the province's 14 million residents, Doug Ford is the only party leader they've ever heard described as a populist, a sort of northern version of Donald Trump.

We don't know whether such attacks are fair or reasonable, but Progressive Conser-vative campaign placards proclaiming Mr. Ford as ?for the people,? surely do have a populist ring about them.

However, Mr. Ford isn't the first populist leader of an Ontario party; far from it. In 1934, Mitch Hepburn used a combination of populism and public antipathy toward the governing Conservatives to score a huge electoral victory.

Going into that June election, the government of George S. Henry had held 90 of the Legislature's 112 seats, but a redistribution eliminated 22 of the seats, including the one for Dufferin. When the votes were counted, the Tories were left with just 17 seats, while the Hepburn Liberals and supporters from the dying Progressive and United Farmers of Ontario parties collectively had 70 of the surviving 90 ridings.

Mr. Hepburn, who before entering politics worked as an accountant and farmer in the St. Thomas area, was a Liberal MP before winning the provincial party leadership in 1930. A Wikipedia biography says of him: ?Hepburn represented a type of agrarian democracy that detested Toryism and valued oratory. He once saw a pile of manure situated in a village square, and proceeded to jump on top of it to give a speech, apologizing to the crowd for speaking from a Tory platform. He also used the same line when standing on a manure spreader, only to have a heckler shout, ?Well, wind 'er up Mitch, because she's never carried a bigger load!?

On his death, the Toronto Star observed: ?It was in the 1934 election campaign that Mr. Hepburn's gift of oratory first impinged on the province at large. He had a free and easy platform manner, his customary attitude being hands plunged in side coat pockets while he wandered about the platform releasing an unfaltering flow of barbed-wire eloquence that no other political speaker could match in rapidity and certainly not in deadliness. He never consulted a note, never appeared to prepare a speech in advance, and delivered an array of astounding facts and figures with such an air of assurance that his audience seldom thought to question them.?

And from the Canadian Encyclopedia: ?Confident and affable, ?Mitch' was a popular farmer ? His speeches on behalf of Ontario farmers and for freer trade were noted more for their wit than for economic insight. ? In office, Hepburn implemented a number of populist measures ? the auction of government limousines and the closing of the lieutenant-governor's residence. He cancelled power contracts with four Québec companies, tried to bring order to provincial finances, improved labour legislation and aided the iron-ore industry.?

However, before long his romance with the electorate began to fade, and his wartime battles with Liberal prime minister Mackenzie King finally led to his resignation as party leader and the Liberals' disastrous loss in the 1943 election that ushered in 43 years of Conservative governments.

Today, there seems no doubt that the Liberals will suffer a similar fate in this election, thanks in part to Mr. Ford's populism. But if recent polls are an accurate measure of the public mood, the Progressive Conservatives will emerge on June 7 with a commanding majority of the 124 seats only because half the electorate is evenly divided between the Liberals and New Democrats, two ?centre-left' parties that have remarkably similar platforms.