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Resurgent NDP trouble for McGuinty

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While today's Star/EKOS provincial poll shows Dalton McGuinty's Liberals still in front of the pack, there are danger signs on the road ahead.

Namely, the New Democrats are back.

Long a dormant force in provincial politics since being turfed from power in 1995, today's poll shows support for the NDP among decided voters at 19.6 per cent — or, rounded off, 20 per cent.

It is the latest in a long string of polls that has put the provincial New Democrats at or above 20 per cent.

In the last two provincial elections, in 1999 and 2003, the New Democrats fell to historic lows with 12.6 per cent and 14.7 per cent of the vote, respectively.

Now they have returned to the 20 per cent level, their traditional floor prior to 1999.

And both common sense and the polling numbers tell us that the NDP is regaining the lost ground largely at the expense of the Liberals. Any further encroachment would reduce the Liberals to minority status, or remove them from power altogether.

What is the explanation for this turnaround, especially given that the NDP has the same leader (Howard Hampton) and roughly the same policies as it had in each of the last two elections?

Hampton himself answered the question during an interview in his office yesterday.

"One factor is that we're doing better at the federal level," said Hampton. "For most people, whether it's the NDP federally or the NDP provincially ... it's the NDP."

Hampton attributed the rise in the federal fortunes of the NDP to the fact that the party is on the right side of the issues, including Afghanistan.

"Forty per cent of Canadians believe we're right, that this is not a place where Canadians should be dying," he said.

A second factor identified by Hampton was the realignment of the political spectrum in Ontario, with the replacement of the Conservatives by the Liberals as the governing party in the 2003 election.

"When Mr. McGuinty and Co. were in opposition, they could campaign as if they were the NDP," said

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Hampton. "Now that they are in government, they are governing increasingly as right-of-centre Liberals."

With prompting, Hampton mentioned a third factor: the ebb of "strategic voting," the label given to the practice of NDP-leaning voters opting for the Liberals to keep the Conservatives out of power.

Strategic voting was clearly a factor in the NDP's poor showing in the 1999 and 2003 elections, when the Conservatives were led by Mike Harris and Ernie Eves, respectively.

But the new Conservative leader, John Tory, is more in the Bill Davis mould and does not scare left-of-centre voters in the way his predecessors did.

"The Liberals have become addicted to what I call the politics of fear," said Hampton "I don't think that's working for them (now)."

One other factor helping the NDP is that success builds on itself.

Hampton, for example, has a spring in his step these days and is performing better as a result.

Although Hampton attributed this, in part, to the fact that his children are older and he can now get a full night's sleep, he also conceded that his early years as leader wore heavily on him.

"The first six or seven years of this were not easy, by any measure," he said. "Not internally, within the party, not internally, within the caucus, nor externally, in trying to establish with the people of Ontario what the NDP is all about. ... I'm not saying by any means the job is done yet, but I think we've made headway."

There are, to be sure, stumbling blocks on the road ahead for the New Democrats, as public scrutiny will increase with their standings in the polls, and many Ontarians may find their positions unrealistic (particularly, their opposition to nuclear power).

The Liberals will also be sure to remind voters of the NDP's disastrous five years in office, from 1990 to 1995, although, in that respect, Bob Rae's candidacy for the federal Liberal leadership is a godsend for Hampton.

Finally, as the election date draws nearer, Hampton is sure to start facing awkward questions about which party he would support and what conditions he would set in a minority Legislature.

But for now, things are looking up for Hampton and the NDP, and that is bad news for McGuinty and the Liberals.

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