

How green is my platform?

Pollsters are confirming a fact our politicians ignore at their peril: For the first time in Ontario's history, the environment will be the top issue for voters

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How's this for an election campaign nightmare?

Back in 1985, a flatbed truck was hauling a used electricity transformer from Alberta to be dismantled in Quebec. As it lumbered along the Trans-Canada highway heading east from Kenora, PCBs slopped from the machinery on to the asphalt.

The spill wasn't huge, but it came at a time of anxiety about the threat of cancer, birth defects and other health problems from the vast array of industrial toxic chemicals being found in the environment.

Enter Morley Kells, the plainspoken "some called him loose-lipped" environment minister in Frank Miller's neophyte Conservative provincial government.

Miller, sworn in as premier only three months earlier to replace the unflappable Bill Davis, was desperately seeking to extend the party's 40-year grip on power.

Things weren't going well in the election campaign and Kells, with a few blunt words about the PCB spill, made them a whole lot worse.

"If you're a rat eating PCBs on the Trans-Canada, you might have some problem," he proclaimed.

The opposition parties and environmentalists pounced like hungry cats. Kells is "cynical and insensitive," fumed Lyn MacMillan, the spokesperson for a loose coalition of green groups. "He should be worried, not the rat."

A minor environmental irritant had ballooned into a major controversy and, for the Conservatives, a campaign calamity. It helped to ensure they lost the election and, before long, Miller had departed Ontario's political scene.

There's a lesson in this tale for the provincial election slugfest that officially begins Monday.

The environment, driven by climate change, is once again a major issue. In fact, pollsters say, in the past couple of years it has vaulted to the pinnacle of voters' concerns, right up there, and possibly even ahead of, health care and education.

Adding to the issue's apparent clout, the province's major environmental groups, for the first time, are working together to push six key policies. In an early-summer survey they commissioned, the environment ranked Number One when people were asked: What's the one issue that will most help to determine how you vote?

"For the first time in Ontario history, environment is going to be driving more people's voting intentions than any other issue," says Rick Smith of Environmental Defence, one of 14 groups in the Priorities for Ontario coalition. It's "a potent issue that political parties ignore at their peril."

This is heady territory for greens, unhappily accustomed to being shuffled to the electoral sidelines.

But here's the rub: When the votes are tallied on Oct. 10, while the environment might decide the outcome in a few ridings, its exalted status is likely to prevent it from determining which party gets the premier's fancy office at Queen's Park.

Unless, of course, some senior candidate pulls a Kells.

In the run-up to the campaign, Environment Minister Laurel Broten nearly accomplished that trick when she and her husband sought to chop down a vintage tree and build a two-storey mega-garage for their four cars. That might seal her fate in Etobicoke-Lakeshore, but hasn't resonated much beyond.

Without a defining gaffe, voters will have little obvious to choose from among the three major parties. Like health care, the environment has become so important that no candidates dare to portray themselves as anything but clean and green.

While the platforms unveiled so far aren't identical " in general terms the NDP is most aggressively green, followed by the Liberals, then, the Conservatives " the distinctions are often subtle.

As well, the effectiveness of environment policies depends on complex details that are never evident until the winning party actually implements

them. At the simplistic level of campaign sloganeering, the crucial nuts and bolts are either missing, or well hidden under a coating of spin that's as thick and impenetrable as a bloom of Lake Erie algae.

The results, says pollster Frank Graves, "The relative differences between the parties and the perception of their ability to deal with (environment) issues is actually modest. So unless somebody really messes up on it, voters will scroll down to a less significant issue" to make their choice.

That means: "(T)he potential to screw yourself here by mishandling an issue is far bigger than the opportunity to advance your cause by adroitly handling it," says Graves, who heads EKOS Research Associates Inc.

History isn't a helpful guide for voters: Most Liberal environmental policies over the past four years have been flawed, overly cautious or little more than public relations gambits. And Premier Dalton McGuinty's team has broken two major green promises " to shut the province's polluting coal-fuelled generating stations by this year and to require a thorough land-use plan before any development occurs in the far north. But the other two parties were much the same during their time in power.

Now, the Conservatives, Liberals and New Democrats all stand firmly in favour of cleaner air and water, renewable energy, targets for lower greenhouse gas emissions, recycling, the GTA Greenbelt, forest protection, better public transit, incentives for energy-efficient products and buildings " in short, the full mantra of the environment movement.

Here's a sample of the now-obligatory greenspeak: "There is no more time for delays or shallow announcements; we need real action and real results to make our province cleaner and healthier."

It comes from the Conservative platform, but could just as well be Liberal or NDP, or even Green.

There are a few significant differences among the parties. Energy policy is one. The Conservatives and Liberals would build new nuclear generating stations; the NDP is opposed. And unlike the other two parties, the Conservatives appear to favour putting pollution scrubbers on the Nanticoke generating station.

The Conservatives, alone, also advocate incineration of garbage.

The Liberal and NDP timetables for greenhouse gas reductions are more ambitious than the Conservative targets.

Those distinctions have the potential to sway votes, particularly with the

green coalition campaigning hard on clean energy. But they aren't expected to launch a province-wide tsunami. For the most part, only dedicated policy wonks can decode the platform nuances.

One example: The Conservatives would preserve the Greenbelt "with its present boundaries."

Sounds good, but it's really an indication they side with landowners and builders, and against environmentalists who argue the protected area must be enlarged to withstand intense development pressure.

The Liberals would "consider applications by regional and county governments to grow the Greenbelt." Since those local governments tend to be in the thrall of developers, the policy amounts to keeping the status quo.

As well, no party "apart, perhaps, from the Greens" has a monopoly on environmental virtue. A case in point: The NDP usually gets high marks from environmentalists, and those who advocate protection of the vast northern boreal forest are pleased the party promises a moratorium on development in the so-far untouched area north of the 51st parallel. But they're worried it would increase the volume of logging south of the line. So the green message is further confused.

Muddying matters more, the NDP says its moratorium would be "followed by meaningful, pre-development consultations with affected First Nations communities." Meanwhile, the Liberals, "will work with our northern and native communities to implement a long-term plan that protects" the far-northern boreal. The Conservatives are silent on the issue.

Despite all this, the green coalition is thrilled their issue is top of mind and primed to make the most of it. Since most have federal charitable status, they can't advocate one party over another or issue graded report cards. But they will provide checklists that compare each platform to those six concerns. They also aim to organize a "high-profile" debate.

They'll push hard on energy policy: Four of the coalition groups yesterday launched a "Clean Energy Campaign," which will urge voters to back renewable energy and conservation instead of coal- and nuclear-fuelled electricity.

"People are paying attention; they'll be keeping track," Smith says. The environment is "no longer an issue that's relevant only to bunnies and pretty flowers. It's now solely related to peoples' health and the quality of their lives, and that makes it a more potent vote-determining issue than ever before."

Another Kells moment, however, would be a big help.