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Vaughn Palmer: The silence of the left edges ever nearer for the NDP

Every dismal polling result brings the New Democrats closer to the Barlee scenario: A near wipeout in the next election

(Victoria) - With every dismal polling result, the New Democrats edge closer to the Barlee scenario -- the ruinous election defeat that was first sketched out a year ago in a report from a consulting firm headed by former cabinet minister Bill Barlee.

"The New Democratic Party is looking at four safe seats and five to six seats in which they will make a race of it but will not likely win," warned the report from Barlee, Geoghegan and Associates, adding: "A complete shutout is not an impossibility."

The scenario was based on an analysis of opinion polls as applied to the province's new 79-seat electoral map. BGA commissioned the analysis from political consultant Bernard Shulmann in the spring of 1999 and distributed the findings to NDP supporters and the news media in an effort to raise alarm bells about the future of Mr. Barlee's long-time political party.

"Unless something miraculous happens between now and the next election, the only likely result will be a Liberal landslide," the report said. "It could also usher in an era of B.C. politics being a debate between the centre-right and the far right, with the left being silenced."

Mr. Barlee's silence of the left was dismissed at the time and it should seem even less likely today, given that the NDP has a new leader, Ujjal Dosanjh, who scored a 64-per-cent approval rating in an opinion poll conducted last week by the Angus Reid Group.

But it should be noted that the Barlee scenario was predicated on the assumption that Mr. Clark would leave office.

Analyst Shulmann (who has since gone to work for a candidate seeking a Liberal nomination) also assumed that once the New Democrats changed leaders they would do better in the opinion polls than they have been.

His assumption: Liberals 50 per cent, NDP 28, Reform 17 and Green 5. The current numbers from Angus Reid: Liberals 57, NDP 16, Reform 15, Green 6.

Grim as it was, the Barlee scenario was based on a better position than the one the New Democrats find themselves in.

The governing party had a blip up to 24 points following the February leadership convention. But that evaporated in recent weeks and the party hasn't seen 28 per cent for more than two years, an awfully long time to be down and out in politics.

Looking at the implications in terms of individual New Democrats, the Barlee scenario gauged the safest seats to be the ones held by cabinet ministers Dan Miller, Gordon Wilson and Jenny Kwan, and

by backbencher Moe Sihota. Then come the half-dozen or so possibles drawn from a take-your-pick selection of the seats held by ministers Joy MacPhail, Sue Hammell, Joan Smallwood, Penny Priddy, Dale Lovick, Jan Pullinger and Gretchen Brewin; backbenchers Glen Clark, Steve Orcherton, Ed Conroy and Rick Kasper; and then minister, now premier, Ujjal Dosanjh.

That's assuming all those incumbents would run, and several of them may not. If so, say the experts, all bets would be off because it is harder for a newcomer to hold on to a seat in the face of a change of government.

A nightmare scenario for the New Democrats, obviously, but some of the Liberals view it with trepidation, too.

They want to win decisively, of course. Yet there's an awareness that a landslide would create its own problems in terms of expectations and sheer hubris. And some of the wiser Liberals will concede that a strong Opposition makes for better government.

A big caucus is hard to manage, too. A premier dispenses perhaps 15 major jobs, mostly cabinet posts, and 15 minor ones, including parliamentary secretaries and chairs of committees. Thirty jobs is plenty for a caucus of 50; less so for 60 or 70.

Another concern with some Liberals is the balance of power within their own caucus, which is, after all, a coalition of Liberals, Conservatives, Reformers and Social Crediters.

The liberal Liberals worry that a landslide for their party could create a government in which a majority of members are actually federal Reformers, placing the "liberals" in a minority.

Hence the strange situation of some Liberals joining the New Democrats in hoping the Barlee scenario does not come to pass.

The more sober observers in both parties expect that the New Democrats will move toward a more competitive position as the election approaches.

That is my expectation, too. But it's hard to cite any evidence of a recovery and time is running out.

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