**Anyone can be a pollster now, Angus Reid laments - even me; Bit of a 'circus'**

Vaughn Palmer. *Vancouver Sun*
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VICTORIA --

The trouble with polling, as granddaddy-of-the-industry Angus Reid sees it, is that these days, pretty much anybody can call himself a pollster.

"It's not like becoming an orthopedic surgeon, where there's actually some control about who gets entry and who doesn't," Reid said. "Anyone can be in the business, and we've had fly-by-night companies that have just suddenly appeared on the scene. So yes, it's a bit of a circus."
Moreover the circus includes a freak show, in the form of computer-activated robo-polling. "You answer the phone, there's a very slight delay, and then there's a computer voice saying hello, we are asking about the election. Who would you vote for? Use your keypad," Reid said.

"Those guys are doing thousands and thousands of interviews to get a sample and it's a pretty scuzzy business, because anybody can be in it," said the 67-year-old veteran pollster, who recently retired after five decades on the commercial side and reinvented himself as the head of the non-profit public opinion institute that bears his name.

"It's very cheap to do polling now," he told me during an interview last week on Voice of B.C. on Shaw TV. "You can go out, for under $5,000, we could set up Vaughn Palmer Polling tomorrow, and you could be doing national polls."

As if professional punditry weren't enough of a blot on one's reputation. But as Reid further noted, one of the biggest changes in the industry is that the news media no longer validates its own polling by paying for the results.

"Thirty years ago, media actually spent money, big money, to do campaign polls," says Reid. "They would pick a pollster and that pollster would become their analyst, and they would work together in sort of a partnership to try to understand things."

Now, with budgets squeezed by the forces that are grinding the media industry every which way, the country's news organizations can't begin to compete with the kind of dollars being spent by the political parties.

"The election pollsters for the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP in this campaign will be billing in the millions of dollars," Reid guesstimated. "The total media spend on polling in this campaign will be under $200,000. It is shocking the extent to which the media just is no longer in the business of paying for polls."

Instead, news organizations are turning to analysts who aggregate the results of multiple polls: Eric Grenier, proprietor of the ThreeHundredEight.com website here in Canada, or the American Nate Silver, author of the Signal and the Noise, a landmark work on predicting elections, sporting events and the like.

"We now have, at this point in the campaign, two or three polls coming out every single day," says Reid. "Grenier squishes them all together, and says OK, what is the consensus here? And you know what, that's a pretty legitimate way to do it."

Which is not to say that he regards all polls as being equal. Though his firm helped pioneer telephone polling, he now believes the method is limited by the rise of call identification (people won't answer when a pollster is calling) and the decline in the use of landlines.

He prefers online panels where the pollster assembles a representative sample of the population and test-markets various issues and opinions over time.

"It requires a lot of investment," he told me. "There's well- done online polling and there's very poorly done online polling."

Case in point, the online sampling conducted by Reid's firm on the eve of the 2013 B.C. Election, which reported the B.C. Liberals nine points behind the New Democrats, just days before they finished four points ahead.

The "rogue poll," as he now characterizes it, was the product of twin failings in the sampling of opinion from the online panel: It did not sufficiently tap into the backlash among the NDP's labour supporters over party leader Adrian Dix's sudden turn against the Kinder Morgan pipeline. And it oversampled the pro-NDP leanings of younger British Columbians, who did not vote in the same proportions as older ones.

"We've done five elections since then, which have all been spot- on," said Reid, defending the record of online polling.

"One big miss and everyone wants to talk about it. ... But this is a business in which there is no commentary associated with the victory of pollsters, and great scourging when you're wrong."

Looking to the current campaign, he cautioned against the temptation to translate any national polling result into seat counts at the local level.

"Making the jump from a single national poll of, let's say 1,500 Canadians, to what's going to happen in a particular riding in Surrey is a very tough jump to make. I can tell you the parties themselves are not doing this kind of national polling. They're doing extensive polling in the swing ridings that they know are important to win the seats."

The key point is that the parties, for all their calculated disavowals of public opinion surveys, are heavily involved in conducting their own polls, and not of the robotic kind and decidedly not on the cheap.

Reid had more to say about the factors in play as the Canadian election comes down to the wire, including the role of strategic voting and his own notions for reforming the system to produce a more representative parliament in future. But those are topics for another day.

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