In this special issue of Canada Watch we have assembled a range of commentators from varying viewpoints to analyze last year's Ontario election campaign and the prospects for the second term of the Harris government.

As a number of our commentators point out, the election campaign was essentially a referendum on the first term of the Harris government. The implementation of the 1995 "Common Sense Revolution" (CSR) program, with its emphasis on tax cuts and smaller government, had provoked an unprecedented wave of protest and social division in Ontario. The 1999 campaign provided the opportunity for vocal opponents of the CSR agenda to throw the Harris government out of office after just a single term.

In early 1999, Harris's prospects for re-election looked uncertain at best. Polls indicated that the government was running second to the opposition Liberals under Dalton McGuinty, who seemed poised to capitalize on the opposition to the government's controversial program. Recent electoral history in the province (with successive majority governments)

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Ontario's new conservative coalition

Between 1985 and 1995, Ontario elections produced a revolving door of short-lived governments, with each of the major parties having a turn in office before being unceremoniously ushered out by what one disappointed ex-premier called a "cranky" electorate. In 1999 the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris that was elected in 1995 seemed set to follow its Liberal and New Democratic Party predecessors through the exit, since it had ruffled many feathers with its radical right-wing agenda (the "Common Sense Revolution" (CSR)) and seemed to lack widespread support. Instead, Harris and his party accomplished what the others could not: they won a second straight majority government.

The government's re-election—which ensures it a run of at least eight straight years in office—is a sign that the period of revolving-door government in Ontario is over. It may also indicate a return to the historic Ontario norm, for, despite occasional interludes of electoral

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The 1999 platform offered little on the key issues of education and health care.

Since the government’s campaign platform was the product of extensive polling and opinion research (as both Fred Fletcher and Robert MacDermid point out in their commentaries), the government clearly believed that this message of “more spending” was necessary in order to secure its re-election. But the result is that the government lacks a mandate to implement any further restructuring in these areas, which will make implementation of significant change extremely difficult.

One cannot help but contrast the initial six months following the 1995 election to the corresponding period in 1999. In 1995, the government hit the ground running, calling the legislature back into immediate sitting. By late July, less than 60 days after the election, it had tabled a “mini-budget” imposing major cuts in proposed government spending, particularly in the welfare area. In contrast, in 1999, the legislature was not called back into session until over four months after the election. The short fall sitting featured a modest legislative agenda before the legislature went back into recess.

Thus, all indications to this point are that Mike Harris’s second term is likely to be much different than his first. Yet the issues and challenges facing the government—particularly in the area of education and training—appear even more pressing today than they were four years ago. As many of our commentators suggest, how the government responds to those challenges will continue to be keenly watched, not only in Ontario but across the country.