

Canada Watch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE 1999 ONTARIO ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The Harris second term: Is the revolution over?

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

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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,

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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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has fallen far behind American and other Canadian jurisdictions. With tuition and special funding factored in, Ontario ranks fourth or fifth in Canada.

Because of the demographic boom, higher participation rates, and workplace demands the increased demand in the next decade for post-secondary education will be astronomical. Estimates from the Council of Ontario Universities (which represents the province's publicly funded institutions) suggest that the system will have to expand by 30 to 40 percent. At a time when the supply of new professors is clearly insufficient for the positions that have to be filled, newly minted PhDs are receiving offers from leading American and European universities far beyond anything that Ontario's universities can match.

There is also the question of the appropriateness of Ontario's approach to economic growth. The government's preoccupation is the province's ability to compete globally; its core belief is that lowering taxes, cutting redtape, and easing regulatory requirements will attract the investment necessary to sustain economic growth.

One test case will be in the area of research policy. Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta have disavowed a laissez-faire approach. Leading American states have taken the flagship route


Electoral, much rests on the NDP's ability to recover. Failing an NDP revival, the theory of party competition suggests that the Tories will move to the centre in their policy choices, if not in rhetoric. Smoothing the rough edges of the CSR makes it harder for the Liberals to stir hostility.

by using public investment to position their institutions as world leaders. Ontario has taken a few halting steps toward the development of a research policy, but it lags behind most jurisdictions.

Ontario will soon make decisions that will have enormous consequences. It may retreat from its commitment to publicly funded higher education by allowing private universities to operate freely. Another route is to change Ontario's community colleges (which are much cheaper on a per-student basis than are universities) into degree-granting institutions. These policy instruments may solve the funding problem but do not address the research infrastructure is-

sue. Reduction of high participation rates is possible through inertia. Without significant funding changes, by the mid-2000s high school students will need averages in the 80 percent range to find a place in Ontario's universities, where high-quality programs will be few.

The Ontario Tories talk about international competitiveness, high-value industries, a highly skilled workforce, and their goal of ensuring that the province is the pre-eminent place for investment and economic growth.

The question: Will Ontario's rhetoric about being ready for the new knowledge-based economy be matched by the appropriate policies? 

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volatility, throughout its history, Ontario has tended to elect long-term governments. In the 20th century it has also tended to elect Conservative governments. The period of electoral volatility from 1985 to 1995 was clearly an exception, and in 1999 a new equilibrium appears to have been established.

When the Harris Conservatives were first elected in 1995, their victory resembled previous Liberal and NDP victories in that it resulted from a sudden late upsurge in voter support. It was by no means obvious that the coalition of in-

terests that brought the Conservatives to power would not quickly disintegrate, just as earlier Liberal and NDP coalitions had done. In 1999, however, not only did the Conservatives retain the same share of the popular vote (45 percent) that they won in 1995, their support was based on the same regional and socioeconomic sections of the electorate. The new Conservative coalition has thus proved to be much more solid than the constructs that briefly propelled the Liberals and NDP to power but proved too evanescent to keep them there.

The demographics of the new Conservative coalition are well known. Members tend to be somewhat older than the electorate as a whole and fewer are women. They also tend to have above-average incomes and education and to be employed in technical, professional, managerial, financial, and other information-based occupations. Many are highly skilled workers in advanced manufacturing industries. Double-income families are the norm. They are stereotypically concentrated in the 905 code area surrounding Toronto, but every city in

Ontario has similar suburbs whose residents have similar life-styles and concerns. Their presence is also significantly large in many small-town and rural areas.

They are home-owning, investing, upwardly aspiring members of the middle class and, not surprisingly, they tend to hold conservative views on a wide range of social issues. Mike Harris's revealingly apt term for them is "quiet, hard-working Ontarians who obey the rules."

In most respects, the new Conservative coalition resembles the Republican coalition that holds sway in many US states, including Ontario's neighbouring states of Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania. The most important difference is the absence in Ontario of an organized, US-style "religious right" with strong links to the Conservative party. Though there are numerous ridings where US-style church groups play an active role in mobilizing the Conservative vote, the coalition's ideological markers, on the whole, have thus far tended to be more exclusively secular than those of its US counterparts. What they share above all with American conservatives is a prevailing conviction that government is not a partner in their prosperity but an obstacle to it.

There is one area, however, where their negative view of government runs squarely up against their experience as Ontarians and their knowledge of the lives of their American neighbours, and that is health care. While desiring lower taxes and less government spending in general, they also see spending cuts to the health care system as a threat to their personal security and well-being. This dissonance was something the Harris Conservatives picked up on in their polling and correctly identified as a threat to their re-election prospects. In the year before the election, the health care pump was primed with announcements of restored spending, claims of new spending and pledges of even greater spending in future.

This theme was carried forward into the 1999 election campaign in which the Conservatives stuck for the most

Harris's impressive victory has made him the most powerful Ontario premier of the modern era. . . . [U]ntil he decides to step down, his personal power will be virtually unrestrained. More than ever, there will be no aspect of his government's policies or priorities that will not bear his personal stamp.

part to two main messages; the first promised further tax cuts and the second promised more spending on health. These commitments were two of the key factors in keeping intact the coalition that had brought them to power in 1995.

The third factor was a skillfully crafted and lavishly funded advertising campaign—including an unprecedented volume of advertising in the pre-campaign period, before campaign spending limits could take effect. The pre-campaign included a barrage of both government-funded and party-funded ads designed to counter the misgivings of many potential supporters who felt that the government was on the right track but was "moving too fast" or "not listening." It also prominently featured a television attack ad designed to fix in the minds of voters a negative image of the then little-known Liberal leader, Dalton McGuinty. The effect was to derail the Liberal campaign even before the election had been called.

Elections are not only won, however; they are also lost. The Liberals ran an erratic, perplexing campaign and the NDP was in obvious disarray from the beginning over the issue of "strategic voting." Neither opposition party seemed to understand that merely being against the Harris government was not enough and that they needed to give voters some positive reason to elect them.

Finally, there is the contribution of Mike Harris to the Conservative victory.

To a degree that is remarkable even in an age of personality-based politics, he personifies his party—to supporters and opponents alike—and in the Conservative campaign his name and image were everywhere front and centre. There was no "Harris team" to praise or blame, no sharing of the media spotlight, no pretense that anyone else in the party mattered.

The campaign, indeed, often seemed to be about nothing but Mike Harris. Hostile protesters dogged his every public appearance, paying unintentional homage by crying for the television cameras "Stop Harris-ment!" as though he were personally the sole author of their discontent. The leaders of the Liberal and the NDP parties paid him back-handed tributes by day after day making him the obsessive focus of their attention, allowing him to eat up their precious television time, to the neglect of their own and their parties' messages.

Harris's impressive victory has made him the most powerful Ontario premier of the modern era. His caucus is indebted to him for their seats, his cabinet ministers for their jobs, his back-room advisers for their future patronage sinecures and lobbying contracts. None of these will offer the slightest resistance to his wishes and, until he decides to step down, his personal power will be virtually unrestrained. More than ever, there will be no aspect of his government's policies or priorities that will not bear his personal stamp.

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For almost all of the Conservatives' mandate, about half of Ontarians were satisfied with the government, the other half were dissatisfied, many very dissatisfied. About half thought the government's pace of change in restructuring education and health care was about right (or not fast enough), and the other half thought the pace was much too fast. About half described the government's spending cuts as appropriate, the other half thought they were too severe. About half supported the Tories' tax cuts, the other half were opposed.

As we intimated earlier, there were two broad areas of consensus that seemed to bode ill for the Progressive Conservatives: large majorities of Ontarians, including significant numbers of self-described Tory supporters, *disapproved* of the Harris government's handling of health care and education. Top-of-mind, these were two of the leading issues on the public agenda. But—and this is key to understanding their eventual victory at the ballot box—the Progressive Conservatives never lost their reputation as the party most capable of handling the economy and fiscal issues. This allowed them to keep their core

supporters, no matter how controversial their legislative agenda, and it was from this base that they were able to remobilize the neo-conservative plurality that had first discovered them in 1995.

This neo-conservative plurality is composed primarily of two groups. The first might be described as voters whose political philosophy is fiscally oriented. This group is dominated by men, the province's more affluent citizens and homeowners, and residents of the 905 suburbs of the Greater Toronto Area. The second group is bound together more by psychographic traits than by shared demographic characteristics. Its adherents believe that previous governments have often caved in to special interest groups, particularly public sector unions, and that government-sponsored social assistance programs have created a poisonous climate of resentful dependence and willful abuse of public generosity. This latter group was especially drawn to Progressive Conservative promises to implement teacher testing, to require social assistance recipients to pass drug and literacy tests before being eligible for welfare, and to rid city streets of "squeegee kids."

As a group, many of these neo-conservatives are inured to, if not pleased with, the inevitable force of global commerce, culture, and communications on their lives. They stand in awe of the power of the American economy to innovate and they question whether the traditional Canadian emphasis on equality and quality of life should be allowed to get in the way of American-style prosperity and Darwinistic struggle in a fiercely competitive world. Indeed, some of these neo-conservatives believe it is not only inevitable, but also desirable, that Canada will eventually be integrated into the United States, with the first symbolic step being our adoption of a common—that is, American—currency.

Certainly, many see themselves primarily as taxpayers and consumers rather than as grateful or complacent denizens of a social welfare state. By virtue of its plurality consensus, it is a way of thinking that has become predominant in Ontario's political culture and, indeed, in that of Canada as a whole. And it is within this context that the Ontario Conservatives were able to replicate their 1995 victory in June 1999. ♦

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The question is, what sort of stamp will it be? Surprisingly, the answer to that question is not as clear as one might think, given his early reputation.

The Mike Harris of the 1999 campaign was a different public figure from the Mike Harris of 1995, and a more interesting one. The earlier version, simplistic "Chainsaw Mike," was still on display, pushing the divisive hot buttons of "crime," "welfare," and "union bosses." As well, his Blueprint platform contained a miscellany of new sops to his party's right wing, from mandatory drug testing for welfare recipients and a crack-down on squeegee kids to recertification for teachers.

But on many occasions during the campaign there was also on display a more moderate, pragmatic, even conciliatory Mike Harris, whose penchant

for plain speaking took a very different turn. This was strikingly evident in the televised leaders' debate: "That is a complex issue," he would say, or "I wish there was a simple answer to that." He may have scored no debating points, but his words had the ring of being an honest response to the realities of governing. Four years earlier, he would probably have recited some half-baked line from the CSR.

At other times in the campaign, he expressed what to many were surprisingly unequivocal commitments to the maintenance of Ontario's public health care and education systems, in terms that were reminiscent of an earlier tradition of progressive conservatism. These statements are bound to upset his party's neo-conservative ideologues. They are also statements from which his Lib-

eral and NDP opponents can draw no comfort: it was a similar concern for the prosperity and common well-being of all Ontarians that kept the old PC dynasty in power for 43 straight years.

There will inevitably be tensions in the Harris government during its second term in office and these are likely to polarize around pragmatists (mainly elected MPPs and ministers) and ideologues (mainly unelected back-room advisers). The party's future, however, will be determined largely by Harris. He has proven himself to be an excellent party manager and, if he uses the next four years to fine-tune his CSR, which a large coalition of Ontarians now supports, and to groom a successor to carry on his leadership, the Conservatives could remain in power for a very long time. ♦