

The 1999 Ontario election

BY E. JANE ARMSTRONG

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It has often been said that governments are defeated, not elected, that voters are more likely to use their ballot to punish an incumbent government than to reward a political party for policies or a campaign performance that they actually like. And, in many ways, that was the fate that befell a number of Ontario's governments, including Frank Miller's Conservatives in 1985, David Peterson's Liberals in 1990, and Bob Rae's New Democrats in 1995. It was also the fate that some pundits—and other vested interests—predicted last spring for Mike Harris's Conservatives a government that forced a possibly record number of controversial policies on what has traditionally been a mild-mannered electorate.

In Ontario in 1999, however, an entirely different scenario emerged. The Mike Harris government was re-elected. In fact, for the first time in 32 years, Ontarians elected back-to-back majority governments. The Conservatives won 45 percent of the popular vote, a slight improvement over their performance in 1995. The opposition Liberals increased their share of the popular vote to nearly 40 percent, up from 31 percent in 1995. The New Democrats dropped to 13 percent, their worst showing since the 1950s.

The Conservatives were re-elected for many reasons, including the power of their election campaign and the reputation of Mike Harris as the most capable leader and one who had proven—in spite of vociferous opposition—that he will actually do what he had promised to do. More important, we believe that the Conservatives won because they were able to reassemble the neo-conservative plurality that brought them into power in 1995 (just as Brian Mulroney had done at the national level in 1984 and again in 1988).

These Conservative victories echoed the success of the British Conservatives and the American Republicans in the 1980s, a time in which the “new” politi-

cal ideas all seemed to come from the right of the ideological spectrum. This was a marked change from the previous half century or more, when the popular perception was that the impetus for change began at the far left, pushing the national debate toward the centre and against a so-called right wing that dug in its heels in an often futile effort to preserve the status quo.

Most of these neo-conservative governments—in particular those under John Major in Britain, George Bush in the United States, and Kim Campbell in Canada—eventually defeated themselves because they were perceived as either arrogant or incompetent, and after the mantle of leadership had been passed from the political titans of the 1980s—namely, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Brian Mulroney.

But, although the power of government shifted to political parties that were nominally to the left, the political agenda as a whole had moved so far to the right that the new governments felt they had no choice but to promise—explicitly or implicitly—that they would continue their predecessors' neo-conservative policies, albeit in a supposedly more compassionate and less ideological manner.

The 1999 Ontario election certainly saw shades of the same scenario, as the provincial Liberals attempted to position themselves as a party that was as conservative as the Conservatives on fiscal issues, but more compassionate and less ideological in other areas and less confrontational in their approach to governing. But, in the end, they were unable to capitalize sufficiently on widespread concern about health care—and, to a lesser extent, education—to successfully steal a portion of the softer Tory vote. The Progressive Conservatives, for their part, countered these efforts by making significant moves toward the political centre, primarily by their promise to increase health care funding. In addition, one cannot discount the effect of the anti-Harris vote being split between the Liberals and the NDP. Even though the NDP collapsed under the pressure of strategic voting, among other things, there were still enough votes cast their way (instead of toward the Liberals) to reduce the chances of a Liberal win.

But let's look beyond what went wrong for the Opposition parties and examine what went right for Ontario's Tories. Going into the election campaign, Mike Harris and his Conservatives, according to our research, were in second place in the polls (and had been for most of their mandate). For much of the time, however, the party was a close second to the Liberals and Environics' quarterly Focus Ontario survey found the Ontario population to be deeply divided on the main issues of the “Common Sense Revolution” (CSR).

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. ♦