

# Political communication and public discourse

When the Harris Conservatives introduced their “Common Sense Revolution” (CSR) in the months before the 1995 election, they intended not only to change the nature of election campaigns in Ontario but of governance as well.

These changes involved not only major policy changes—restructuring health care, education, and local government, not to mention reducing the rights of unions, and proposing balanced budget and referendum legislation—but also changes in the nature of political communication and public discourse in the province.

The 1999 campaign and the nature of the government’s political communication in their second mandate suggest that they are succeeding. The shift from consensus-based politics to a polarized discourse may well be permanent. Certainly, election campaigns are unlikely to be the civilized affairs of earlier decades, where the governing party rarely mentioned the names of the other party leaders. Indeed, the Conservatives ran in 1999 as if they were in opposition.

The communication strategies of the Harris Conservatives can be traced to their campaign strategy in the 1995 election and have remained remarkably consistent into their second mandate, despite indications after their second victorious campaign in 1999 that the government’s post-election approach would be more “managerial.”

The consensus-building style of the Davis years (1971-85) was succeeded by a somewhat more confrontational approach during the Liberal (1985-90) and NDP (1990-95) governments; but this was more a matter of policy disagreements and personal rancour than of deliberate policy. The Harris strategy, brought to Ontario by Republican political consultants imported from the United States, was a more deliberate, research-

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driven approach, designed to differentiate the Harris Conservatives from the front-running Liberals and to polarize the electorate.

This strategy, which involved, among other elements, extending the election campaign, relying heavily on television, and scapegoating various groups, has not only altered electoral and governmental communication but has changed the nature of political discourse in the province. In addition to stimulating an unprecedented level of public protest, the strategy also encouraged the emergence of a right-wing populist discourse that had been suppressed by the pre-existing social consensus around a moderate, “red Tory” approach to public policy.

The central communication strategies of the 1995 campaign—centralized control of a simple message, extensive pre-writ campaigning, heavy reliance on targeted television advertising, the use of “hot button” or wedge issues to polarize the electorate—were carried

over into the policy communication processes during the first mandate and remained the key principles of the 1999 campaign as well.

What might be called the “suburban strategy” of political communication is described in some detail in an interesting recent book by Stephen Dale, *Lost in the Suburbs: A Political Travelogue*. This strategy plays on the fears of many suburban voters.

Dale compares the suburban voters targeted effectively by the Republicans in the United States with the “905 voters” who have provided key electoral support for the Harris Conservatives. Dale suggests that the Greater Toronto Area suburbs share some important attitudes with the US “edge cities” that were tapped by the Conservative campaign: a privatized, compartmentalized style of life; alienation from community and government; a sense (not supported by evidence) that there is “a wave of criminal activity moving north from the big city” (at 299); a “highly leveraged” lifestyle, marked by a high level of personal debt and a degree of economic insecurity, exacerbated by stagnant personal incomes.

In 1995, the promise of tax cuts, deregulation, and reduced government spending resonated with these voters, whose faith in government action had been eroded by recession and threats of increased government activity in areas such as employment equity, anti-racism education, and smoking restrictions. Despite the economic growth of the late 1990s, the insecurity remained in 1999, but the emphasis in the Conservative campaign shifted to crime and social control, symbolic actions that would not involve significant public spending.

Both the 1995 and 1999 campaigns were heavily dependent on television.

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In 1995, the Conservatives flooded the airwaves in the Toronto suburbs with comparison ads aimed at the alienated suburban voters, with great success. Suburban voters, who often work long hours and face long commutes, are best reached by television, with ads targeting a small number of emotive issues—a strategy employed with considerable success by the Republicans in the United States. As Dale demonstrates, the 1995 Harris Conservative campaign, including both policies and strategies, was an “off-the-rack” version of the successful Republican campaigns.

Both illustrate well the benefits of an extended campaign. In 1995, the Conservatives built a strong foundation for the campaign, releasing the CSR document, holding constituency meetings, and preparing materials, including campaign videos, in advance. With the advantages of government, the Harris people made unprecedented use of government advertising, aired some pre-writ party advertisements, and altered campaign regulations to benefit the party with the most financial resources.

In 1999, the Conservatives used government advertising to try to shore up support for their policies in health care and education, to reinforce the image of teachers' unions as unrepresentative or obstructive, and to promote Mike Harris as a tough and credible leader. One advertisement alleged that “union bosses”—a favourite phrase of the government—wanted to protect “higher taxes, bigger classes [and] less time teaching kids.” The government settled a libel suit brought by the Ontario Teacher's Federation by, in effect, admitting that the ad had incorrectly characterized the union's position.

The government advertising, paid for by public funds, struck many observers as more clearly partisan than any previous government advertising in Ontario. In his 1999 annual report, the provincial auditor responded to complaints about the ads by recommending that the province adopt clear guidelines distinguish-

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ing government from partisan advertising, as New Zealand has done. Reading between the lines, *Toronto Star* Queen's Park columnist Ian Urquhart interpreted the auditor as concluding that “the Tories clearly crossed the line separating legitimate government ads from partisan political ones” (November 17, 1999). The New Zealand guidelines distinguish between ads designed to explain government policies or inform the public about services, rights, and liabilities, which are legitimate, and those “designed to secure . . . popular support for the party-political persuasion of the members of the Government.” The ads attacking critics of government policy were clearly unprecedented in Canada.

In defending the ads, government spokespersons argued that the government had no choice but to respond to critics, who were advertising themselves, and critical media (like the *Toronto Star*). It is the timing of ads, in the runup to the election, and the use of public funds that raises ethical and policy questions.

The Harris strategists also broadcast television advertising in the pre-election period paid for by the Conservative party, before the party spending and advertising limits came into effect (when the election was called). The most important of these was an ad characterizing the new Liberal leader, Dalton McGuinty, as “not up to the job” of premier. This widely disseminated ad was important because it helped to “define” the oppo-

sition leader before he had a chance to create his own image, since Ontario voters pay little attention to opposition parties until an election is called.

In particular, this ad signaled an important theme in the Conservative campaign—not only that McGuinty was not a strong leader like Harris, but that the election of the Liberal party might jeopardize economic recovery in Ontario—an appeal that had particular resonance for suburban voters.

In both 1995 and 1999, the Conservatives worked hard to control the agenda, concentrated on a few major themes that were packaged as the “message of the day,” often with illustrative images or gimmicks, such as the “spendometer,” controlled party communication from the centre to ensure that all candidates followed the script, and “narrowcast” particular appeals to target voters. Neither the additional tax cut proposal in 1999 nor work for welfare had broad appeal, according to the polls, but they shored up support among key groups, alienating primarily those who would not vote Conservative in any case.

The innovations likely to have the most lasting effects are those that changed the nature of campaigning in the province—extending the campaign, abandoning consensus politics in favour of polarization, and imposing tight central control, not only on local candidates but on the premier and key ministers as well. Other parties will be forced

to respond in kind, and Ontario elections in the immediate future at least will be driven more by money and advertising than in the past, and by appeals to self-interest rather than competing concepts of the public interest.

In terms of governance, these strategies have carried over into the way in which the government conducts business between elections as well. Unlike previous Ontario governments, the current government has reduced the powers of the legislature, cut back dramatically on consultations with stakeholders

and on public hearings, and centralized control of media relations in an attempt to focus all government communications on a few simple messages. Recently, for example, Robert Fisher, host of Global Television's *Focus Ontario*, ended a broadcast by thanking Guy Giorno, a key figure in the premier's office, for "permitting" the government house leader to appear on the program.

During its first mandate, the government renamed the coordinating committee of cabinet the Policy, Priorities, and *Communications* Board and re-

quired all government policy proposals to be accompanied by a communication plan with a clear message related to the CSR, often accompanied by government-funded polls measuring support for the policy not so much in the general public as in the key geographical and demographic constituencies supportive of the Conservatives.

Given a determined and well-funded Conservative party in Ontario, it may well be that other parties will have to adopt many of these communication strategies to compete. ♦

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Needless to say, the NDP was strongly opposed to the idea, believing that it would lead to the election of more Liberals than NDPers. My own view at the time was that the only way strategic voting could work would be if the parties themselves accepted it. In other words, if the NDP would cede to the Liberals in certain ridings and the Liberals to the NDP in others. When it became clear that this would never happen, the strategic voting approach was doomed to failure. There were other problems as well. Who would decide which candidate to support? How would this information get communicated to voters? And why would most voters listen to those groups? Nevertheless, since it had little impact, it did not damage the NDP's electoral results. I have talked to a couple of people who do this sort of number crunching and they see no evidence of NDP loss because of strategic voting.

Beyond the divisions produced by Rae's social contract, most of the people struggling for social change in this province do not see their interests and concerns reflected in the NDP. No doubt, NDP back-roomers believe that the loss of core activist supporters, whom they see as out of touch with modern realities, is the price the party has to pay for increasing its popular support. But where is the evidence? Whenever the party has run on a third-way right-wing program, it has lost.

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Nevertheless, a winning strategy does not mean returning to the bad old days of social democracy. Mind you, David Lewis's corporate welfare bums campaign of 20 years ago seems pretty relevant today.

The only way a social democratic party can win electoral victories in most provinces, including Ontario, is to identify with the majority of the people who are struggling to keep their heads above water in an increasingly polarized society. Harris and others have managed to convince a lot of these people that tax cuts, attacks on the poor, and a survival-of-the-fittest society is in their interest. The NDP's job is to outline a different road, a road to social solidarity rather than social division. The best way to do this is by identifying with those fighting for social change.

Instead of a few million dollars difference here or there, the NDP should be putting forward a radical new direction, a real alternative to the autocratic, slash-and-burn politics of Mike Harris and Jean Chrétien. The elements of this alternative are being developed around the world: participatory democracy, economic democratization through taxing finance capital, and shorter working hours are among the ideas that the NDP could develop. The "Days of Action" in Ontario and, more recently, the massive demonstrations in Seattle against the World Trade Organization show there is a mass base for alternatives to neo-conservative politics. The NDP should be riding this wave of protest rather than standing on the shore with the other two parties watching it go by. ♦