

Money and the 1999 Ontario election

BY ROBERT MACDERMID

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Elections are complicated events that defy anything more than incomplete explanations. We know that, in the end, the Tories won the election by a close, yet safe, margin. They were helped by the enormous edge they had in raising funds and by an almost flawless campaign. Between the beginning of 1995 and the end of 1997, the Tories raised \$27.7 million to the Liberals' \$10.2 million and the NDP's \$8.8 million. The 1999 campaign, the third with much the same cast of strategists, showed that the Tories have learned most of the lessons the American campaign industry has to offer, including being in perpetual campaign mode, using TV advertising, and collecting large sums of money between elections. They also learned that changing the rules of the game to their own advantage can never hurt.

The Tories had a welcomed problem—they had a large number of wealthy corporate and individual contributors who wanted to give money to the party, but whose largesse was limited by the cap on the size of contributions. Between 1995 and 1997, the Tory central party got maximum contributions of \$4,000 from 735 corporations and 58 individuals. By comparison, the Liberals had only 335 and the NDP just 42 maximum corporate contributions. From individuals, the Liberals got just 3 and the NDP got 6 maximum contributions. The NDP received a further 6 donations of \$4,000 from unions. The Harris government, without the all-party agreement normal (though not required) for changes to the *Election Finances Act*, raised the contribution limit to \$25,000 beginning in 1999, almost doubling the amount of money a contributor could give to a party in an election year. Under the new rules, the Tories collected \$4.9 million dollars in contributions, 12 times the \$408,556 the NDP collected and 4 times the Liberals' \$1,266,650. The raised limits are a benefit only to the very wealthy. Most Ontarians could not imagine giv-

ing such sums to a party even if they were inclined to do so.

Campaign expenditure caps make raising substantial amounts of money pointless if they prevent a party from spending the influx of cash, so a second change the Tory brain trust initiated was to allow the parties to spend more money, raising the central party limit on spending from \$2.7 million in 1995 (less than half of what they raised in 1999), to \$4.5 million. Under the new rules, the Tories spent \$4.0 million on the central campaign compared with \$3.5 million for the Liberals and \$2.1 million for the NDP. But the Harris changes did not stop at raising the limit, they also redefined an election expense. They removed from under the cap all polling and research costs and expenses for the leader's tour. (Is there *anyone* who thinks these are *not* election expenses?)

Over the past four Ontario elections, the costs of polling and research during the campaign have often been below 10 percent of total party expenditures. In 1999, the Tories spent a whopping \$1,337,680 on polling, or 23 percent of their total expenditures (those under and outside the cap). The Liberals managed to spend just \$107,000 on polling, while the NDP spent \$138,000. Adding these figures in, as they would have been in previous elections, shows the Tories spending \$5.8 million, the Liberals \$4.2 million, and the NDP \$2.4 million. If the polling costs had been included under the campaign spending cap, the Tories would have had to curtail spending in other areas, specifically, on television advertising. The changes allowed the Tories to spend \$3.5 million on television advertising (double what they spent in 1995), while the Liberals could spend only \$2.9 million, and the NDP just over \$1.0 million.

The expenditure on polling is a window on the Harris election machine's inner workings. Such a large expenditure would have permitted daily polls of substantial size, 500 to 1,000 interviews, throughout the entire election. Campaign polling should not be confused with the horse-race polls produced for the media. Rather, it is about testing campaign messages and assessing how a party's core voters are reacting to the messages, it is about determining how voters are relating to the leaders and how what the leaders do and say can be altered to appear more favourable to core voters, and it is about assessing the effect of advertising and fine tuning the messages. Being able to spend unlimited funds on polling gives a campaign the opportunity to manipulate and tailor messages to their strengths and their opponents' weaknesses. Flush with contributions, the Harris Conservatives took full advantage of their changes to the spending rules.

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setting the tone for future capital investments. To be considered for SuperBuild funding, colleges and universities will need to demonstrate the amount of partnership funding in place, projected student demand for the new facility and programs, and the project's impact on local/regional economic competitiveness.

In the final analysis, the success of an education and training agenda will not be measured by the size of government allocations to colleges, universities, and schools. Business investment levels in workforce training and in post-secondary partnerships are not the most critical measures either. Although a key thrust in education and training reforms is directed at implementing new and creative approaches to financing, success will be based on results—and assessing the results against widely accepted goals and benchmarks.

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Performance measures should have practical connections to the long-term strategic goals of Ontario's education and training system, emphasize results or outcomes instead of efforts or activities, be easily understood, and be flexible enough to allow for improvements.

As a practical next step, the process of establishing performance measures should encourage Ontarians to converge, collaborate, and stay focused on the goal of strengthening the education and training system's contribution to long-term economic prosperity. ♦

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The government also reduced the length of the election campaign to 28 days from what had usually been about 40 days. The TV advertising period of three weeks now made up a greater proportion of the total campaign. Being able to spend much more than the other parties on TV advertising gave the Tories an advantage in the shorter campaign. There was less time to discuss the government's record and a greater percentage of the campaign left voters open to the manipulation of advertising. The shortened campaign also helped the Tories fashion their fund-raising lead. A party with a large number of willing and wealthy donors requires only a few well-connected individuals to collect large sums of money rapidly. But a party that relies on many small contributions from individuals will need a longer period to collect large sums through techniques such as mail fund raising. The complete information on contributions is not yet available, but the fact that the Tories could raise 90.5 percent of their contributions in the form of donations

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over \$100 while the Liberals and NDP raised 83 and 71 percent, respectively, in the same form suggests that the Tories were again able to take advantage of the rule changes they initiated.

What to make of all of these changes and their effects? The Harris Tories would not have initiated them if they did not see a benefit. The changes helped them to outspend their competitors by a wide margin and forced the Liberals to end the campaign almost \$2.9 million in

debt and left the NDP owing \$1.9 million. For Ontario political parties, those are major debts that will require both the NDP and Liberals to intensify their efforts to raise money from corporations and that, in turn, will require policy concessions favourable to businesses and the wealthy. As we move toward more expensive elections, the policies of all parties will need to become more attuned to the wealthy who can foot the election bill. ♦