

Defeating Harris: The glass is half full

BY ANDREA CALVER

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For those interested in social justice, the deep polarization of Ontario's electorate should indeed be comforting. Bleak? Maybe, but I'll take the evidence of success where I find it. The electorate's division represents a hardening distrust of the Harris agenda. Where there once was easygoing support for the incoming government, there is now a sharply divided province.

The question now is whether Ontarians will be hushed by a lullaby of welfare bashing and tax cuts. That's why activists must sound a wake-up call on these issues. It is the right thing to do and also makes good strategy. Two of the government's most potent and enduring platforms consist of demonizing people on welfare, combined with aggressive tax-cut hype. It goes to the heart of who they are, and if this nasty foundation can be cracked, the government will be very vulnerable when reassurances about health care and education prove unfounded. Then the Tories will be in deep trouble. Unlike the virtual enthronement of Alberta's Ralph Klein, Premier Harris is governing on borrowed time.

When Mike Harris was first elected in 1995, most Ontarians were delighted to see a change in government. Overwhelmingly, Ontarians felt the time had come to try new policies with a new party. Enough were willing to give the Harris government a chance.

Why then did Harris have a much harder fight for re-election in 1999? The "Common Sense Revolution" (CSR) was met by "counter-revolutionaries" who exacted a heavy toll on the government between 1995 and 1999. Ontario witnessed a diverse and widespread wave of discontent. Although the government was re-elected in 1999, it was with a much reduced majority in the Legislature. Ontarians of all political stripes are suspicious of this govern-

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ment recasting itself in kinder, gentler terms. The Harris government is somewhat chastened. It is required to be more cautious, and dares to attack only the very marginal—exhibit A: your local squeegee kid.

FOUGHT TO STANDSTILL ON HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION

The anti-Harris movement prioritized health care and education in the first term. Unions, front-line workers, groups like People for Education, and the Ontario Health Coalition fought hard and important battles. These issues headlined at most large demonstrations. Throughout the first term, massive events such as the "Days of Action," the OPSEU strike, and the 1997 teachers' political protest moved a critical number of people away from the Tories. Specifically, we succeeded in moving public opinion on both health care and education. Both became top public concerns, sometimes sounding mantra-like as though they were in fact one issue: HEALTHCARE EDUCATION.

Of course, the constituencies directly benefiting from health care and education greatly exceeded both the numbers and power of any other single group of service users. The Tories were forced to run a series of expensive, government-paid ads to convince Ontarians that their policies would not hurt. Remember the now infamous "bandage ad"? The script compared successful health care restructuring to a child learning to remove a bandage quickly. "It'll hurt less" says the helpful TV mom. This was an argument the Harris government wanted to win. A death-bed conversion produced earnest Tory election promises to both protect classroom spending and to increase health care spending.

The trouble with HEALTHCARE EDUCATION

Unfortunately, the anti-Harris movement focused too exclusively on the issues of health care and education. Despite heroic efforts on the part of groups like the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and Low-Income Families Together, welfare continued as a prime platform on which Harris could *gain* ground the tougher he was.

The Tories took the opportunity to play nice on health care and education, while marginalizing welfare and other services. Social assistance has always been the poor cousin of health care and education when it comes to a competition for the public's purse or sentiment.

HEALTHCARE EDUCATION squeezed out other worthy and potentially politically damaging issues—including housing, child poverty, childcare, and the needs of women's shelters.

TAX-CUT HYPE

The connection between tax cuts and the cuts to health care and education

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were not properly cemented. We have not dispelled the many Harris myths on taxes. Slogans like "tax cuts create jobs" are proffered as fact. Although a truer statement may be that "tax cuts create inequality."

The Ontario alternative budget shows that the average household has lost ground by \$28 under Harris's tax policies, when just some of the user charges and other fees that have gone up are offset against the tax cut.

Our vision of a socially just society costs money—specifically, money redistributed through the tax system. The Harris tax cuts and economic policies are bleeding our province of the capacity to provide adequate social services and programs to its people.

LESS WELFARE = MORE POVERTY

Although poverty is increasingly visible to Ontarians, our campaigns did not

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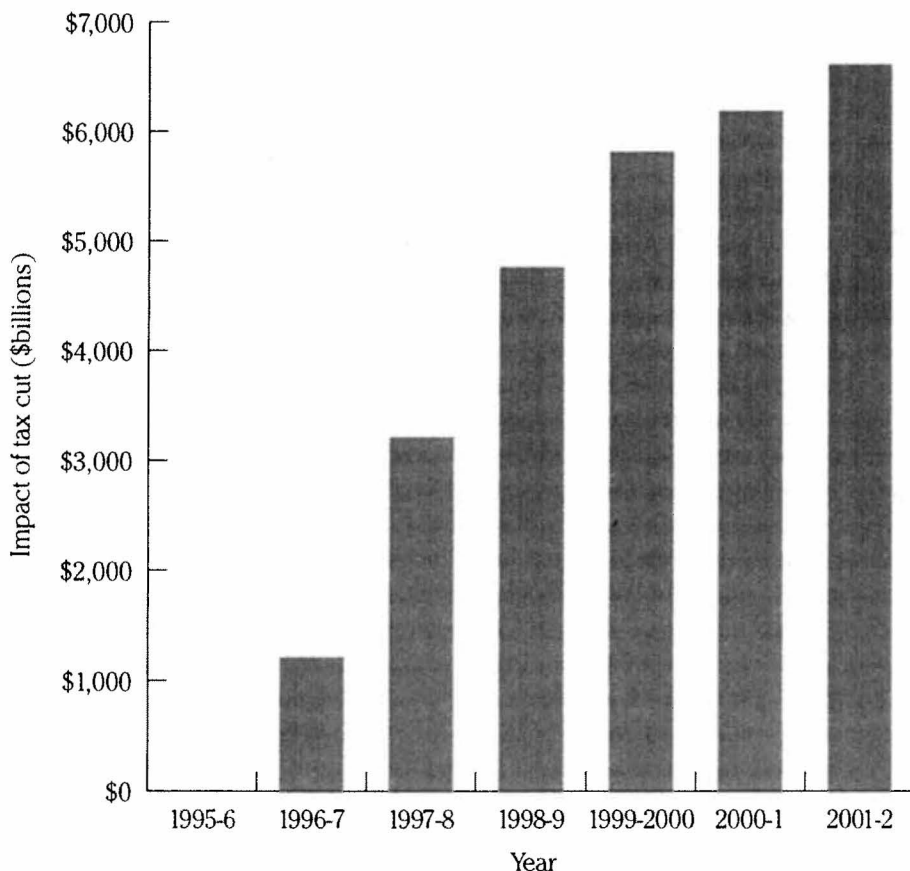
confront the Harris government's policies as a leading cause of poverty.

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the government's claims simply don't add up. If the public is less concerned about a "growing gap," they ought to be concerned about a "truth gap."

A report on workfare, *Broken Promises: Welfare Reform in Ontario*, by the group Welfare Watch found that, far from offering people a "hand up," the program is actually hindering people's efforts to leave welfare.

Cumulative annual direct cost of tax cut



Source: Ontario Alternative Budget Working Group, Technical Paper #3, March 1998.

NEW ORGANIZING

We need to reach more people on more issues. Harris's second term will see a different style of opposition organizing. The challenge will be to hold on to the people who already oppose the Harris government while we build that group larger and larger. I travel all across Ontario and have been convinced of the critical importance of regional organizing in this pursuit. We also need to expand the organizing beyond health care and education. Anti-poverty organizing is now the fastest growing area of community-based activism in Ontario.

Among other things, electoral polarization has meant that the government is taking a different tack toward its opponents. Where once it was impossible to have a telephone call returned, many ministers are now seeking out their opposition for meetings. It is an acknowledgment of the difficulty of governing a deeply divided province. It is also a concession unimaginable in the first term.

At least the Harris government knows how close it came to defeat the last time round. ♦