

# The Harris legacy: A conjecture

BY DAVID CAMERON

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Is it too soon to begin thinking about the Harris legacy in Ontario? I am sure Mike Harris would think so. After all, he is only part way through his second term and—who knows?—he may yet run for a third.

But let's give it a try, anyway. Twenty years hence, what will people think was the most important thing the Harris government did during its term of office? There are certain obvious candidates.

One, clearly, would be the main plank of the "Common Sense Revolution" (CSR)—the simultaneous reduction of the deficit and taxes. The government has been successful in doing this partly through the blind luck of being in office when the provincial economy returned to health. Nevertheless, if politics is in part the mastery of events by will, Harris and his colleagues should be given credit for a bold—many said at the time, foolhardy—determination to do this, come what may, and for making people believe that they would do whatever it takes to achieve this double-barreled goal.

Another candidate would be the introduction and implantation in Ontario political life of the neo-liberal ideology, which has swept much of the Western world. It would have come to the province in some form and at some time in any case, no doubt, but the Tories imposed it on Ontario with an unapologetic exuberance that has clearly marked their tenure of office as a turning point. Neo-liberal thinking has become the defining paradigm of this historical moment, shaping the opinions even of those who oppose it, and cutting the channels within which most significant political debate occurs. It won't last forever, but there's no denying that it is very big right now.

A third candidate would be the basket of social-policy upheavals the government has inflicted on the province. The reorganization, consolidation, and program interventions in the health

care and education fields were among the most controversial initiatives of the Harris government's first term. Yet, despite all the sound and fury, I do not think these policy shifts amounted to a root-and-branch transformation of our health and education systems. It is possible that the second term will see a deeper penetration and a more profound transformation of these policy fields but, so far, that has not happened.

These are all plausible candidates, but I would pick none of them as the thing for which the Harris Conservative government will be most remembered 20 years from now.

I think this government will be remembered most for what it did to Toronto. I think that Harris may have inadvertently breathed life into a sleeping giant, which will, in time, rise to challenge many of the existing institutions whose dominance we take for granted.

For decades, government after gov-

ernment evaded its responsibilities in Toronto; the political structures of the Toronto area became increasingly obsolete as the metropolis grew. Finally, Premier Harris and his cabinet—almost casually, it seemed—decided to take the proverbial bull by the horns. Apart from the vaguest of references in the CSR to potential municipal efficiency gains, neither the bull nor the horns was prefigured in the Tories' 1995 electoral platform. Yet the creation of the new Toronto may prove to be the real revolution.

You may applaud or condemn what the Tories have done. You may lament, as I do, that a much stronger GTA authority was not created. But the long-term impact of this municipal restructuring is likely to be profound. And not only in Toronto proper—or improper, if you prefer. The 905 belt is already rethinking its arrangements, living as it does in the shadow of a giant—witness the proposals of suburban mayors to abolish regional government and reduce the number of cities in the region.

If the size of the electoral base defines the size of the political office, the mayor of Toronto occupies the biggest office in the land. Elected by a constituency of almost 2.5 million people, the mayor is without rival in the number of people he directly represents. What is more, the people he represents are an intensely concentrated, wealthy population with their hands on the country's most important levers of power in finance, industry, and communications. If the creation of the new Toronto makes it possible for this community to rise to a full consciousness of its power and its distinctive interests, the impact on the province and on the country may be profound.

Yes, I hear you saying, but the municipalities in this country, including the Municipality of Toronto, are political pygmies, with scant financial strength and few political resources, dependent

for their existence and survival on the provincial governments whose creatures they are. That is true, and the willingness of provincial governments to download real political power matching the offloading of social responsibilities is next to non-existent. However, events sometimes have a way of gathering their own momentum, and a reform designed with one end in mind—in the case of Toronto, shifting social responsibilities to the local level and forcing economic efficiencies—can have unintended consequences. Already you hear talk of making the GTA a province; the January issue of *Saturday Night* has a feature story on “Torontonia,” developing this idea in some detail.

Just talk, you say. Yes, for the moment, it is. But very large metropolitan centres will be the magnets in the 21st century that attract people, money, and global linkages. The dispersion of power

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that is a consequence of the forces of globalization and of the implementation of neo-liberal ideology is being felt at the provincial level as well as in Ottawa. Who or what is receiving this power?

People tend to think the recipients are the private sector, transnational corporations, international trade agreements and other regulatory regimes, and emergent global institutions. So they are. But large cities are the benefi-

aries of this shift as well, and the Harris government's decision to endow Canada's largest city with a much more coherent political structure is freighted with significance for the long-term future of our province and our country. If I'm right, people in 2020 will look back and say of the Harris administration in Ontario: “That's when Toronto started to flex its muscles as a real political force in the country.”

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