

DUFFERS OR PROS? SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE GOVERNMENT OF MIKE HARRIS

BY JUDY REBICK

The tragedy of errors around Bill 26, the Ontario government's authoritarian omnibus legislation, reveals a great deal about Mike Harris's government. Drunk with power and initially overconfident, the government has shown itself to be inexperienced and incompetent in its handling of the omnibus Bill. It may be easy to get elected on slogans, but it is infinitely more difficult to govern with them. And slogans are much of what holds the Harris government together.

They were elected on a platform of a few simple ideas: cut welfare and make the poor work for their money, repeal the "quota" (employment equity) Bill, massively reduce government spending, and cut provincial taxes by 30 percent. Unlike the Reform party, Harris did not campaign on a particularly populist democratic program, but most people voting for him did not expect the authoritarianism that is the inevitable result of his simplistic form of fiscal conservatism.

That Harris has simultaneously taken on almost every group in Ontario society, with the notable exception of the business elite, is no doubt as much due to naiveté as to authoritarianism. Harris is following the advice of the New Zealand champions of slash-and-burn, hit-them-hard-and-fast, and don't blink. He is following the example of Ralph Klein, and then some. But Mike Harris is no Ralph Klein, and Ontario is no Alberta. Harris is an ideologue, Klein a master politician, Harris has

been a true-blue fiscal conservative as long as anyone remembers, Klein is simply riding the right winds of slash-and-burn. Harris is surrounded by neophyte New Right Wunderkinder who understand little of practical politics. And, of course, Ontario has a strong and vibrant left, including, most importantly, a powerful

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TAX CUT AND OTHER MANTRAS

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When you challenge most of Harris's ministers, you get back the mantra: "Ontario is spending \$1 million an hour more than we are taking in and we have to cut." If the urgent need to slash government spending is the reason for the excessive powers given to cabinet ministers in Bill 26, how do they explain the proposed tax cut? As opposition members have pointed out, the tax cut will cost \$4-6 billion in revenue, compared with about \$8 billion in spending cuts. This does not even take into account the loss of revenue that will be caused by massive layoffs in the public and para-public sectors. Their answer is another mantra: "Tax cuts will put more money into the pockets of the taxpayer and that will create more jobs." No evidence, just a slogan. Even the most skilled ministers, like Finance Minister Ernie Eves, are unable to explain the mystery. When reporters asked him how many jobs would be lost due to his spending cuts, he had no answer.

The repetition of simplistic slogans has become a habit for politicians in the age of sound bites. But without a more sophisticated strategy behind the slogans, a government cannot accomplish much. Harris's intention to carry out a radical New Right agenda at lightning speed faces a major roadblock — the democratic process.

ASSAULT ON DEMOCRACY

As many have pointed out, Bill 26 is an assault on democracy, an assault on many levels. First, and most obviously, the rush to pass the Bill means that the usual political process of debate through public hearings and the legislature has been short-circuited. If it had not been for an extraordinary opposition sit-in in the legislature, there would have been

no debate at all on this 200-page Bill.

But shortcutting debate is not the only way in which Bill 26 undermines democracy. The public sector is composed of a series of autonomous institutions, such as hospitals, universities, school boards, and Crown corporations. These institutions rely on government funding, but are governed by independent boards. Bill 26 begins the transfer of their powers into the hands of cabinet ministers and their bureaucrats.

Bill 26 also totally undermines the bargaining power of public-sector unions, especially those in essential service areas. By requiring arbitrators to take into account the government's or institution's ability to pay, the Bill ensures that arbitrators will be no better than representatives of the employer. These measures, when added to the Draconian anti-labour Bill passed earlier in the government's mandate, are a further undermining of democracy.

The power-grab by the executive branch of the government represented by this Bill is breathtaking. Numerous decisions that were previously made through the legislature, or at least in consultation with appropriate stakeholders, can now be made unilaterally by the minister.

The courts are another limit on the power of government. Although the Harris government can do nothing to amend the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, it can, and does in Bill 26, limit the right of appeal to the courts of a series of government decisions. Some academics claim this aspect of the Bill will be found to be unconstitutional. After all, if you remove the right of citizens to appeal government decisions

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its opening position, McMaster University's administration proposed to the faculty association a nine percent reduction of salaries while preserving career progress and merit increments.

The November 29 economic statement signals a new era for Ontario's universities. Instead of developing orderly change and a comprehensive strategy to restructure the university system, the government has just slashed. Even before this round of cuts, Ontario chronically provided some of the lowest levels of funding of any province. A greater burden has been placed on the individual student. Although this action may be in keeping with the trend toward a greater user-pay ethos across many sectors and serves to bring Ontario closer to some American states, the province's enviable post-secondary participation levels and the quality of teaching and research are bound to suffer.

The cuts are bad enough, but that they appear so thoughtless makes them that much harder to accept. ❖

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to the judiciary, you are undermining a fundamental civil right.

We expected a government hellbent on cuts. We expected a government that would favour the rich and powerful, and undermine the organized power of poor and working people. We expected a government that would work against equality rights, but we did not expect a government that would so cavalierly ignore a generation's worth of democratic processes and principles. We should have.

If Harris believes his own propaganda about the debt crisis, democracy gets in the way of a quick solution. Committee hearings, consultations, and court appeals get in the way of slash-and-burn solutions. So it makes sense that the government, believing itself to have the support of the people, will do away with as much of this democratic process as possible.

A government that claims to reduce its size is systematically increasing its power. Any thinking right-winger will surely understand that a more left-leaning government could use these same powers in the future to once again expand the size of government, or introduce regulations to promote more equity in the marketplace.

A GOVERNMENT IN TROUBLE

Harris and friends are no doubt worried about the level of protest in the province. In the few short months of their reign, there has been a massive demonstration on the day of the Throne Speech, an extraordinary sit-in by opposition parties, an unprecedented one-day strike in London, Ontario, to be followed by one in Hamilton; protests from reli-

gious groups; constant demonstrations around the province wherever the premier appears; and almost daily rallies at Queen's Park, including a huge teachers' demonstration. No government can withstand this level of protest in a democratic society.

Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but I believe this government is already in trouble. Government ministers and ad-

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visers seem to have been chosen more for their ideology than their skill. They have handled the controversy around Bill 26 with less than aplomb. No one, including the premier himself, seems to know what is in the massive Bill. The 160 amendments do nothing to change the essence of the power-grabbing nature of the Bill, but show how poorly drafted it was from the beginning. They are between a rock and a hard place with their promised tax cut. Economists are warning that it will increase the deficit. Social activists are decrying the unfairness of cutting the income of the poor so drastically while giving the rich more money. Workfare, a key election

promise, will prove too expensive and unworkable.

So what we are witnessing is a government on ideological autopilot, given to fits of extreme arrogance one day, and shuffling incompetence the next. Their early heartless attacks on the poor provoked immediate active opposition among those ideologically opposed to them. Their recent fumbling move to centralize power has no doubt raised serious questions among many who supported them.

As an ideologue, Harris is unlikely to retreat from his agenda, but it may not be folly to hope for a somewhat more cautious approach in the days to come. ❖

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