

Canada: Ontario Tories intensify assault on social and public services

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With a provincial election expected this spring or fall, Ontario's governing Tory party has set out to cultivate a kinder, gentler image. Ontario Premier Mike Harris still lashes out against welfare "cheats," "union bosses" and unruly teenagers, and vows the Tories will press ahead with their "Common Sense Revolution." But, to employ the lingo of their pollsters and ad men, the Tories are "repositioning" themselves to assuage mounting public concern over the deterioration of Ontario's public health and education systems and the spread of poverty.

In recent weeks, the Tories have put their compassion on display, participating in a national summit on homelessness, and announcing some modest social spending initiatives. However, only in the healthcare sector are the Tories investing significant sums of money, and most, if not all, of that new funding is coming out of an increase in federal government transfers.

Since coming to power in June 1995, the Tories have cut more \$1 billion from the province's \$19 billion annual health budget. Government critics claim the true figure is closer to \$2 billion, because the Tories have included costs arising from the closure of 35 hospitals, including severance pay and the revamping of remaining facilities, as healthcare expenditures.

Pollsters have repeatedly found healthcare to be the number one concern of Ontario voters. There are months-long waiting lists for so-called non-emergency surgery, including treatment for life-threatening conditions like cancer. In Toronto this winter hospital emergency wards shut down repeatedly due to an overflow of patients. Emergency room overcrowding is "the canary in the mine shaft," said Raisa Deber, a University of Toronto health-policy professor. "When other parts of the healthcare system aren't working, it shows up in emergency, because that's the one place where they can't turn you away." But turn them away they did, sometimes by the scoreful.

The Tories are now reinvesting hundreds of millions in healthcare and Harris has pledged to drastically shorten hospital waiting lists. Healthcare practitioners dismiss the

new funding as the equivalent of a bandaid for a patient who is hemorrhaging. Moreover, the thrust of Tory policy is in the direction of privatizing healthcare services. As a result of changes that came into effect this month, private companies will now have the right to compete with nonprofit organizations in supplying government-funded homecare.

In other areas the Tory thrust to the right is even more evident.

Workfare: The Ontario government's workfare scheme "Ontario Works", which forces welfare recipients to work for subminimum wages at community service jobs, is now being extended into the private sector. Private sector companies are receiving large subsidies to employ welfare recipients, although to date the scheme is little more than a pilot project. The private sector workfare plan calls for participants to keep their jobs after the six-month subsidy expires, but even Janet Ecker, the Social Services minister, acknowledges that such placements might not work.

To provide a further incentive for people to "reintegrate" themselves into the workforce, the Tories have made changes to a Social Services Ministry program that provides free dental care to those in demonstrable financial need. Under the new program, the children of persons on welfare will receive inferior and less expensive treatment than those of the working poor.

Since the Tories tightened eligibility requirements for welfare and slashed welfare benefits by more than 21 percent, the number of persons in Ontario receiving welfare has fallen by some 350,000. The government touts this as a great success story, although it has no data showing whether these people remain in Ontario or are working and, if so, what type of jobs they have found. Unquestionably, some have been absorbed in low-paying jobs in the relatively buoyant economy of recent years. But the correlation between the decline in welfare rolls and the expansion of poverty and homeless is undeniable.

Increased state repression: A year ago, the Tories identified crime as one of the issues they would emphasize in the run-up to the next provincial election. This is not

because there has been an increase in crime; on the contrary, the incidence of violent crime has fallen over the past five years. But crime is regarded as a "wedge" issue--one that can divert attention from the unpopular aspects of the government's agenda and direct it towards a target which can act as a lightning rod for social tensions.

Last fall, Harris announced funding for the hiring of a thousand additional police officers. In recent weeks, the Tories have focused their attention on youth crime and sought to equate it with a purported general lack of respect among young people for authority.

Harris was quick to denounce the new federal Youth Criminal Justice Bill as too lenient. The federal Liberals in fact pilfered most of this bill from the right-wing Reform Party.

Consistent with their efforts to place responsibility for social ills and support on individuals and their families, the Tories are proposing to make the parents of young offenders provide financial compensation for crimes committed by their children.

While teachers, parents and other supporters of public education have mounted strikes and protests to oppose the Tories' cuts in education funding and business inspired curriculum reform, the Harris government has claimed that students' demeanor is at the root of the problems in the province's education system. To address this alleged discipline problem, Education Minister Dave Johnson and Harris are contemplating making school uniforms mandatory at all Ontario schools.

Under a plan announced last year, seven Ontario prisons are being privatized and the government is now considering privatizing young offender facilities as well.

The Balanced Budget Act: One of the most far-reaching pieces of legislation introduced by this government is "The Balanced Budget and Taxpayer Protection Act" (Bill 99). This bill, which should become law in the current legislative session, is aimed at financially hamstringing the provincial government, so as to ensure that the Tory social spending and tax cuts cannot be reversed. Its purpose is thus to entrench in law the transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich that is the essence of the Common Sense Revolution

Under Bill 99 future Ontario governments will be legally barred from running a deficit, unless revenues fall by more than 5 percent or the provinces faces a natural or man-made emergency.

The Tory claims about the imperative of a balanced budget cannot be reconciled with their own record in office. They have run up multibillion-dollar deficits ever year in office, largely because they wanted to reward their well-heeled supporters with a phased-in, 30 percent tax cut.

Under Bill 99, stiff fines would be levied against future

premiers and ministers should the province run a deficit. This law also requires that any new taxes or tax increases be approved by Ontario voters in a referendum.

Significantly, Bill 99 passed first reading with the support of the provincial Liberals, the Tories' principal parliamentary opponents.

Anti-Union Laws: Under Bill 31, otherwise known as the Wal-Mart bill, the Tories have stripped away the power of the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to certify unions whose organizing drives were thwarted by unfair labor practices. It also stipulates that a union must win the secret ballot votes of the majority of employees, not just those voting, to win accreditation.

In a rare fit of honesty, the Tories named another of their Bills the "Act to Prevent Unionization." Passed last November, it strips participants in workfare programs of the rights to join a trade union, bargain collectively and strike.

Shrinking the public sector: Finance Minister Ernie Eves has said the Tories will make a further \$600 million in unspecified spending cuts in this spring's provincial budget.

The Tories are also pressing ahead with cuts in civil service jobs and privatization. They have announced that over the next three years they intend to cut the province's payroll by 13,500 more jobs through privatization and the downloading of responsibilities onto lower levels of government, and by squeezing more work out of a reduced work force. The Tories have already eliminated 16,500 civil service jobs.

Meanwhile Ontario Hydro, Canada's largest Crown Corporation, has been broken up into two corporations as part of a 10-year plan to deregulate the electricity sector. Ultimately, most of the industry is to be passed into private hands.

The past four years have witnessed mass struggles against the Tories. But in the run-up to the provincial election, the popular outrage is muted. Although many will vote for the Tories' parliamentary opponents, the Liberals and the social-democrats of the New Democratic Party, neither of these parties inspires confidence among broad sections of working people and rightly so. Both the Liberals and NDP have been complicit in the Tories' class-war assault and have publicly reconciled themselves to the key tenets of the Common Sense Revolution.



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