

Ontario's June 3 election: a verdict on the Tories' Common Sense Revolution?

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18 May 1999

The press and politicians claim Ontario's June 3 election will render the people's verdict on the Tory government's Common Sense Revolution. Certainly many working people, waged and unwaged, will go to the polls to vent their opposition to the Tories' sweeping cuts in social and public services, victimization of welfare recipients, and anti-union legislation. But the blunt truth is that Ontario's entire political establishment, including both parliamentary opposition parties and the leadership of the trade unions, now accept and support the fundamental changes in social policy and class relations the Harris Tory government has effected since coming to power in June 1995.

Both the Liberals, the Official Opposition in the outgoing Ontario parliament, and the social-democratic New Democratic Party, have taken up the big business mantras of "fiscal responsibility," "balanced budgets" and "competitive" tax rates. Neither party has pledged to abolish workfare or repeal any of the Tories' more than 21 percent cut in welfare benefits. Should the Liberals or NDP come to power, no more than a handful of the three dozen hospitals the Tories have ordered closed will be reopened.

The more vehement Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty and his NDP counterpart, Howard Hampton, become in their denunciations of Tory Premier Mike Harris, the more they echo Tory policy. Most of the opposition criticism of the Harris government now revolves around the Tories' confrontational style of governance and purported lack of compassion. In outlining the NDP's welfare policy, Hampton baldly asserted the "issue isn't money."

Last week Liberal leader McGuinty matched the Tory promise to outlaw budget deficits and to legally compel binding referenda on all tax increases—measures designed to prevent future Ontario governments from ever increasing social spending, even in times of economic crisis. "This is nothing less than the price of admission for government in 1999," declared McGuinty. The Liberal leader then chastised Harris for announcing a new round of tax cuts before balancing the provincial budget, "I am prepared to pay that [admission] price and Ontarians should understand

that Mike Harris is not."

The press generally plays up the differences between the three parties. But journalists now routinely describe the Liberals as "blue lite," a reference to the Tory campaign colors and a popular Canadian beer, or, recalling George Bush's attempt to put some distance between himself and the Reagan administration, as "gentler, kinder" Tories.

The labor bureaucracy is divided over electoral tactics, but both wings have lurched sharply right and are hoping to help propel the Liberal McGuinty into the premier's office.

A large section of the union officialdom, led by Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove, is urging "strategic voting" in favor of the Liberals wherever their candidate is the most likely to prevail over the Tory nominee. Since the opinion polls show the Liberals and Tories running neck-and-neck and the NDP enjoying the support of just 12 percent of the electorate, "strategic voting" amounts to stumping for a Liberal government.

The NDP, meanwhile, is hoping for a hung parliament and an NDP-Liberal governmental coalition, whether formal or de facto. But the social democrats will be happy if they can win 12 of the 103 seats in the provincial legislature and thus retain official party status. Speaking for the NDP establishment, former NDP Premier Bob Rae has said the Tories' opponents must take their cue from Britain's Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton, the respective successors of the Thatcher-Major and Reagan-Bush regimes, and recognize that "the paradigm has changed." "A program based on undoing many of the Harris changes is doomed to minority support."

The labor bureaucracy's acceptance of the Tories' Common Sense Revolution is the culmination of a decade of historic betrayals. The Rae NDP government, which held office in the first half of the decade, laid the political and ideological groundwork for the coming to power of the Tories on a program inspired by the Gingrich Republicans' Contract with America. Although working people had turned to the NDP in 1990 to protect them from the ravages of economic slump and the economic restructuring that resulted from the

Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the Rae NDP government became the spearhead of the big business offensive against the working class, initiating massive cuts in social spending, imposing onerous tax hikes, and suspending the collective bargaining rights of 1 million public sector workers under its wage-cutting “social contract.”

The Ontario Federation of Labor organized mass protests against the Harris Tories. But in late 1997, when a strike by 120,000 teachers against Tory education policy began to transcend the limits of collective bargaining and to become the spearhead of a mass political mobilization against the Tories, the union bureaucracy corralled the teachers back to work, then terminated the anti-Tory protest campaign.

Opinion polls show continued widespread opposition to the Tory cuts in social spending, particularly to public healthcare and education. But the labor bureaucracy's repudiation of its traditional reformist program and suppression of working class resistance to the Tories has sowed considerable confusion.

Although big business has lavished unprecedented financial support on the Tory re-election effort and the most privileged income groups have reaped by far and away the largest reward from the Tory tax cut, the Tories are enjoying some success in their attempts to paint themselves as the spokesman for the so-called middle-income taxpayer.

As in 1995, the Tories are appealing to deep-rooted anger and anxiety over increasing economic insecurity and to widespread alienation from traditional politics by portraying themselves as the protagonists of change and by stigmatizing marginalized and vulnerable groups, like welfare recipients and squeegee kids.

The opposition is incapable of effectively answering the Tories' scapegoating, for to do so would require exposing the class contradictions that rent Canadian society and the failure of the capitalist market system.

Similarly, the opposition criticisms of the Tory social spending cuts are not credible. Voters know that in the 1990s governments across Canada and of all political stripes have imposed dramatic spending cuts.

Although the spectrum of official politics has moved markedly to right, the increasing social polarization is finding distorted reflection in the election campaign. Harris has had daily encounters with angry demonstrators, and police, no doubt acting on Tory instructions, have responded aggressively, making frequent arrests. The campaign is less than two weeks old, but it is already the most acrimonious since at least 1945, when big business red-baited the social-democratic CCF (forerunner of the NDP).

Harris has accused McGuinty of having a “secret deal” with the unions and being soft on crime. The Tories'

principal election promises are to cut provincial income tax rates by 20 percent over the next five years, reduce property and corporate tax rates, amend the labor code to make it easier to decertify unions, rapidly expand workfare in the private sector, force welfare recipient to undergo drug tests and compel those found using drugs to participate in a drug rehabilitation program or lose all benefits.

McGuinty began his campaign by focusing on the Liberals' pledge to modestly increase funding for healthcare and education. But in response to media criticism that the Liberal election effort was off to a wobbly start, he has repositioned the Liberals as the party of “fiscal responsibility” and “self-interested compassion.” McGuinty charges that by indiscriminately cutting healthcare and education, the Tories have imperiled Ontario's international competitive position.

Of the three parties, the NDP is actually calling for the smallest increases in health and education spending, although, it must be added, there is more than a little truth in the NDP's claims that their opponents' promises are based on rosy economic forecasts, if they are not outright lies. The NDP's main feint toward its reformist past is a pledge to roll back the Tory tax cut for those with taxable income of more than \$80,000, i.e., the wealthiest 6 percent of Ontarians.

As the Liberals stand to benefit from a collapse in the NDP vote, Harris has repeatedly sought to give the flagging NDP campaign a boost by favorably contrasting Hampton, whom he terms a “strong leader,” with McGuinty.

Ultimately, the bitterness of the election campaign is rooted in the deepening social tensions produced by the ever-escalating big business offensive against the working class. Some sections of the bourgeoisie, whose views are articulated by the pro-Liberal *Toronto Star*, fear the Harris Tories are too brazen in their exaltation of the market and wealth and in their readiness to dispense with programs and practices that in the past have proven effective in dissipating and smothering social discontent. In particular, these sections of big business believe the union bureaucracy must play a key role in making Ontario “internationally competitive” by policing working class unrest. Other sections fear that any temporizing in the class war will both further erode Canadian capital's international position and serve only to encourage a working class counteroffensive.



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