

Ontario election notebook

Keith Jones
27 May 1999

A spate of favorable opinion polls have emboldened the Tories to impart a more reactionary tone to their reelection campaign and flesh out their socially regressive platform.

In recent days, Ontario Premier and Tory leader Mike Harris has made “safety,” “discipline” and “public order” key campaign themes. He has promised to give police new powers to rid the streets of panhandlers, squeegee kids, and the “aggressive” homeless; accused Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty of being “soft on crime” because he once served as a criminal defense lawyer; and pledged to force all welfare recipients to undergo tests for drug abuse.

“We are going to be more aggressive than we have been in the past,” declared Harris last week, as he outlined plans to prohibit “approaching, blocking, harassing, or following a person for the purpose of obtaining money ... in a manner that causes a person to feel threatened,” and to amend the Highway Traffic Act “to prohibit anyone from stepping onto a road or highway to approach a vehicle to ask for money or to offer a service.”

Harris's portrayal of the victims of the Tories' welfare cuts as a threat to public safety caused even Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty to observe that the Tories will never be able to build enough jails to house all the people they have made homeless.

Also last week Harris detailed a Tory plan to establish a Code of Conduct for Ontario schools. “The time has come to instill a greater sense of respect and responsibility throughout our society, starting with our youth, and starting with our classrooms,” said the Tory premier. Under the proposed code, students will face automatic expulsion for dealing in drugs or alcohol on school property, bringing any kind of weapon to school, or committing criminal assault. Existing provisions that require a hearing and approval of expulsions by the local school board are to be scrapped.

From the outset of the election campaign, the Tories have made no secret of their intention to press ahead with their so-called Common Sense Revolution—i.e. with the

redistribution of wealth from the poor and working people to the privileged. The Tory election platform gives pride of place to further tax cuts and balanced budget legislation, measures designed to ensure that the fiscal pressure for social spending cuts is unabated. Nevertheless, in the campaign's early days, the Tories did try to mollify public concern over the state of the province's public health and education systems by promising to restore some of the funding they have cut over the last four years. These promises were largely hollow—detailed analysis of the Tory election budget has shown that the spending increases for health and education are based on rosy projections of continued economic expansion and are to be financed in large part by deep spending cuts in other areas. But with the polls indicating they will win a plurality of votes and a majority of seats June 3, the Tories have shifted gear and ceased altogether talking about “reinvesting” in public services. Their aim is to position themselves to claim a popular mandate for a wave of new reactionary measures, including further cuts to public healthcare and education.

Facing electoral oblivion, Ontario's social democrats have effected a feint to the left. New Democratic Party leader Howard Hampton, who stood aloof from the anti-Tory strikes and protests that convulsed Ontario in 1996 and 1997, now routinely castigates the Liberals and Tories for transferring wealth from the poor and working people to the rich.

Replying to Tory leader Mike Harris and his Liberal counterpart Dalton McGuinty in last week's televised leaders' debate, Hampton declared, “You both want to focus on a tax cut for the most well-off people in the province at the expense of social programs.”

In subsequent campaign appearances Hampton has repeatedly returned to this theme. “If you want [Tory leader] Mike Harris's agenda, you've got two choices: You can vote for Mike Harris 1 and Mike Harris 2.” “When push comes to shove [Liberal leader] Dalton McGuinty would continue to cut hospital services, funding for schools, colleges and universities... He would

continue to worship at the altar of right-wing tax theory.”

In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Hampton ruled out a coalition with the Liberals in the event of a hung parliament, although in the 1980s the Ontario NDP propped up a Liberal minority government for two years and a broad section of the trade union bureaucracy is currently mounting an “anybody but Harris” campaign. Said Hampton, “I couldn’t see a coalition because the fundamental differences are so big. I’m sorry, I’ll leave politics before I buy into that gunk.”

The NDP strategy is one that the social democrats have frequently employed in recent years when faced with the prospect of an electoral rout—tack to the left in the hopes of appealing to disgruntled NDP voters and others disaffected by the tilt of the entire political spectrum to the right. Although the NDP won a majority of seats in the last Ontario election but one, opinion polls show it currently enjoying the support of less than 20 percent of the electorate, thus placing it in serious danger of falling short of the 12 seats needed to retain official party status in the Ontario legislature.

Largely because of a collapse in its Ontario support, the NDP lost official party status in the federal parliament in the 1993 election. Four years later, it regained official status after a campaign that successfully tapped into widespread popular opposition in the Atlantic provinces to the federal Liberal government’s cuts to Unemployment Insurance. Subsequently, federal NDP leader Alex McDonough admitted that the NDP’s 1997 platform was a campaign device and should not be taken as an indication of what the NDP would do were it to form the government.

For his part, Tory leader Mike Harris has been openly promoting the NDP. Harris has repeatedly praised Howard Hampton, including during the leaders’ debate. While the Tory premier has derided the Liberal McGuinty as a “weak leader” who “is soft on crime,” he has repeatedly vouched for Hampton’s integrity and sense. Hampton “has a plan that makes some sense and he’s not all that negative,” declared Harris. Later during a campaign swing in northwestern Ontario, where Hampton’s constituency is situated, the Tory leader said the NDP leader “seems to be able to express” the Tory opponents’ “viewpoint better than anyone else.... Howard Hampton and the NDP do have credibility on the issues.”

Harris’s praise for the NDP and Hampton is rooted in crude electoral calculations. A resurgent NDP would take votes away from the Liberals, the Tories’ main election rival. But the Tory attitude towards the NDP underscores

that big business has taken the measure of the social democrats and well recognizes whose interests they represent. After all, it was the 1990-95 Rae NDP government that blazed the trail for the Harris Tories, by imposing massive social spending cuts and suspending collective bargaining rights for a million public sector workers under a wage- and job-cutting “social contract.”

Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove is spearheading the “strategic voting” drive of a section of the union officialdom. Breaking with its traditional support for the social-democratic New Democratic Party, the CAW is urging workers to vote Liberal wherever the Liberal candidate has the best chance of defeating the Tory nominee.

For their efforts, Hargrove and company have been rewarded with the most right-wing Ontario Liberal campaign since the days of Mitchell Hepburn, who won reelection in 1937 on a pledge to keep the CIO movement for industrial unionism from spreading to Ontario. Dalton McGuinty, the current Liberal leader, last week compared himself to Alberta Tory Premier Ralph Klein, whose government has repeatedly been lauded by the Fraser Institute, an ultra-right-wing think tank, as the most “business friendly” in Canada.

A guest of honour at last week’s relaunch of the General Motors Impala, Hargrove took a swipe at the Ontario Tories on behalf of both GM and his new found friends in the Liberal Party. Hargrove, whom the media and pseudo-socialist publications like *Socialist Worker* have long-promoted as a “left,” criticized the Tories for having given tax breaks to Japanese automakers in the recent Ontario budget. Declared Hargrove, “It is companies like GM that make real investments in this province that deserve the tax breaks.”



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