

Ontario Tories re-elected—Harris government will intensify class war

Keith Jones
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Ontario's right-wing Tory government was re-elected with a comfortable legislative majority in Thursday's provincial election. With 45.1 percent of the popular vote, almost the exact share they won in the last election, the Tories captured 59 of the 103 seats in the provincial legislature.

The Liberals increased their share of the popular vote by 8 percent to 40 percent and won 35 seats. The Official Opposition in the outgoing provincial legislature, the Liberals moved sharply to the right during the election campaign and embraced many of the Tories' key policies. But the Liberals benefited from the perception, promoted by much of the trade union leadership, that they alone could dethrone Mike Harris's Tory government and halt the dismantling of social and public services.

For the second successive election, the New Democratic Party suffered a rout. The social democrats garnered less than 13 percent of the popular vote—down 9 percent from their disastrous showing in 1995—and won just nine seats, three less than the total requisite for recognition as an official party in the legislature.

The Tories and their big business bank-rollers will seize on the election results to claim they have a popular mandate to press ahead with hospital and school closures, the conscription of welfare recipients in private sector "workfare" schemes, and the adoption of new antiunion laws. "Ontario endorses Harris revolution," trumpeted Conrad Black's *National Post* Friday morning.

According to Tory aides, one of the government's first priorities will be to secure passage of legislation outlawing future provincial budget deficits and forcing binding referenda on all tax increases. These measures and cuts in provincial income, business, and residential property taxes are designed to ensure that there is no lessening in the fiscal pressure for social spending cuts and that the redistribution of wealth from the poor and working people to the privileged continues.

Speaking Thursday, Harris vowed to implement the Tory election program *Blueprint*, including a series of reactionary measures aimed at criminalizing "aggressive" begging and reinforcing social "order" and control. Declared the Tory premier, "I'll not be thrown off that agenda."

The election results constitute a debacle for the labour bureaucracy. In 1998, the Ontario Federation of Labour scuttled a wave of mass protests against the Harris government and plans for a one-day, province-wide general strike ostensibly so that the unions could concentrate their resources on defeating Harris at the

polls. But Harris has been returned to power and the OFL's traditional political instrument, the NDP, has recorded its worst ever showing in an Ontario election. (In fact, the NDP's share of the popular vote is the lowest won by Ontario's social democrats since the 1937 election, when the NDP's predecessor, the then five-year-old CCF, won 5.6 percent of the vote.)

Just two Ontario elections ago, the NDP won more than 37 percent of the vote and was propelled to power. Bob Rae's NDP government subsequently came into open conflict with the working class, initiating sweeping social spending cuts and suspending the collective bargaining rights of more than a million public sector workers so as to impose a wage-cutting "social contract."

In the run-up to the 1999 Ontario election, the unions split over tactics, with the Canadian Auto Workers spearheading a campaign for "strategic voting"—that is a vote for the Liberals wherever the Liberal candidate was best placed to defeat the Tory nominee. This initiative won the backing of the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest circulation and most pro-Liberal daily.

While many NDP voters did opt for the Liberals, others recoiled from supporting a party that whilst in power in Ottawa has implemented social spending cuts bigger in both real and proportionate terms than those of the Harris Tories. Moreover, the Liberals repaid Hargrove and their other new-found union allies by embracing the Tories' proposed balanced budget legislation and championing "fiscal responsibility."

Although the campaign was the most heated in decades, more than a third of the electorate did not vote, indicating mass alienation from, if not distrust of, all three parties.

Of the 26 Tories targeted by the strategic voting drive, nine were defeated. Of these, the most prominent were Education Minister David Johnson and Isabel Bassett, a second cabinet minister and the wife of the owner of a television broadcasting empire.

Even before the votes were cast, recriminations over Harris's impending re-election were emanating from the top echelons of the unions. CAW President Buzz Hargrove said NDP leader Howard Hampton's attacks on the Liberals "might be enough to elect Harris to another majority government." Ontario Teachers' Federation President Liz Barkley also chastised Hampton for describing Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty as "Mike Harris 2." "It's not true and it's meaningless," affirmed Barkley. "Their programs are very different."

Asked by the *National Post*, how the Ontario Public Service

Employees Union (OPSEU) would respond to a new round of Tory job cuts and privatisations, OPSEU representative Bill Trbovich trotted out the bureaucracy's standard call for a pressure campaign. "How do we respond? We lobby to keep hospitals and public agencies open on the basis that's the best way to ensure safety and efficiency and accountability."

By accommodating demands for social reform with the needs of big business, the Tories were able to dominate Ontario provincial politics in the post-World War Two period, holding power, whether as a majority or a minority government, from 1943 to 1985. The Harris Tories, by contrast, have ruthlessly put paid to so-called brokerage politics. As one columnist noted, "The Harris government's radical right-wing agenda was a marked contrast to the centrist politics that Ontario had been accustomed to for half a century. Mr. Harris took office with the support of 45 percent of the electorate and he appeared to govern as if these voters were the only ones whose support he needed."

The Harris Tories encountered widespread and deep-rooted opposition. In November 1997, the government's aura of invincibility was punctured when 120,000 public school teachers mounted an overtly political strike despite Tory threats to have them prosecuted for defying Ontario labour law. The teachers' action had the potential to become the catalyst of a mass movement against the Tories, but it was torpedoed by the union and NDP leaders. For all their anti-Tory bluster, the labour bureaucrats preferred that the Harris government prevail than it be driven from power by a class mobilisation of the working class.

The standings in the Ontario Legislature notwithstanding, masses of people have not and will not be reconciled to the dismantling of public services, the pauperisation of the unemployed and the assault on democratic rights. Indeed, many working people who believed the Tory claims of substantial "reinvestments" in education and healthcare will be shocked in the months and years to come to learn that, as even the pro-Tory *Globe and Mail* observed, the Tories' pre-election budget concealed plans for massive future spending cuts.

The debacle of the labour bureaucracy's political strategy will cause the opposition to the Tories to seek new avenues, outside the traditional spheres of collective bargaining and parliamentary protest. But if this opposition movement is to grow and articulate the political and social aspirations of working people it must be animated with a new political perspective and break free of the political grip of the unions and NDP.

Many explanations are being given for the Tories' re-election.

Certainly, the current economic expansion played a role in the Tories' electoral triumph. But this expansion differs from all others in the post-war era in that its benefits have accrued almost entirely to the well-to-do. Average take home pay remains substantially below what it was in 1989.

Another facile explanation is the first-past-the-post electoral system. In the 1990 election, this system favoured the purportedly pro-workers NDP. But once in office the NDP proved beholden to big business. Indeed, it was the Rae NDP government which prepared the political-ideological terrain for the Tories to come to power in 1995 on an expressly right-wing program. The NDP not only pioneered many of the Tory policies, including first floating

the idea of welfare. Rae repeatedly insisted the NDP's traditional social-democratic program was utopian and that there was "no alternative" to following the dictates of big business and subordinating policy to the imperatives of the capitalist market.

The truth is: within the framework of the three-party system there was no way that the opposition to the big business agenda could find genuine expression. The Liberals and the NDP, no less than the Tories, are parties of big business. Along with the trade union bureaucrats, the Tories' parliamentary opponents served to politically undermine the opposition movement by demonising Harris, the better to obscure that he was merely spearheading a right-wing counteroffensive in social policy to which all governments across Canada subscribe. Then, in the months leading up to the election, both the Liberals and NDP embraced key elements of the Tory agenda. Reflecting the narrowing and rightward shift of the political spectrum, even the big business media began to refer to the Liberals as "blue lite." (A reference to the Tory colours and a popular Canadian beer.)

With the opposition having little more to say than that the Tories had gone too far, too fast, Harris was able to set the terms of the political debate. The core of the Tories' popular support, as evidenced by opinion polls and voting results, lies in the more privileged sections of the middle class—in the suburbs of Toronto and among those earning more than \$60,000 per year. Yet, as in 1995, the Tories were able to tap into a broad swathe of popular alienation born of economic anxiety, by portraying themselves as the party of principle and of change, and by victimising marginalised social groups like welfare recipients and squeegee kids.

The re-election of the hated Harris government underscores that the time is long overdue for the working class to forge a new political instrument that will challenge the subordination of all aspects of life to the capitalist market and fight for social equality.

Such a party would not be an electoral party, nor a party of protest. Rather it would fight to infuse the struggles against corporate "downsizing" and the dismantling of public services with a new perspective—the working class must fight for political power so it can implement a program to radically reorganise the economy in the interests of the majority.



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