

Ontario Premier resigns

Amid mounting legal and political crises

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Mike Harris announced October 16 that he is stepping down as Premier of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, and as Ontario Tory leader. The darling of Canada's right, Harris has epitomized and spearheaded the big business offensive against the working class. Since coming to power in June 1995, the Harris Tories have slashed billions from public services, victimized the poor, gutted workplace and environmental regulations, attacked trade union and democratic rights, and rewritten the tax regime to boost corporate profits and swell the incomes of the rich and super-rich.

Harris claims personal reasons are at the root of his resignation. This is, to put it politely, balderdash.

Harris is bailing out, because he and his government are caught in a swirl of interconnected crises.

The Canadian economy is plunging into recession. Opinion polls and by-election results attest to mounting public outrage over the Tories' cuts to health care and education. Harris faces possible criminal prosecution over his attempt to cover up his and his government's role in a lethal police assault on an Indian protest. And the public inquiry into the contamination of the Walkerton water-supply has indicated that it will find that the scope and speed of the Tories' downsizing of the Environment Ministry contributed to the deaths of seven people.

In his appearance last June before the Walkerton inquiry, Harris refused to admit that his government bears any responsibility for the Walkerton tragedy. Confronted with evidence that he and his ministers were repeatedly warned that the privatization of water-testing and an almost halving of the Environment Ministry's budget could end in disaster, Harris responded with obfuscation, lies, and right-wing mantras about the superiority of the capitalist market. The sub-text of his testimony was that the death of seven people was the collateral damage that had to be paid for a booming economy.

A pliant corporate media proclaimed Harris' testimony proof of his political fortitude. In fact it was a disaster for him and his government, for it underscored the Tories' callous indifference to public welfare and their subordination of basic human needs to the dictates of big business.

There have always been good reasons to doubt Harris' claim that he and his government played no role in the Ontario Provincial Police's assault on a peaceful Indian protest at Ipperwash Provincial Park. The police action came less than three months into the Tories' first mandate, when the new government was

already facing a groundswell of protests over its 22 percent cut to welfare benefits. How better for Harris to make a display of his toughness and indifference to opposition than by beating up on Indian protestors?

Then there was the OPP's aberrant conduct. The police had indicated they would allow the occupation to continue, pending the outcome of negotiations. Then suddenly, and without any provocation, they mounted a bloody assault, killing Dudley George in the process.

Harris has insisted for the past six years that he neither ordered nor had prior warning of the OPP assault. A 1997 criminal negligence conviction of the OPP officer who shot George made it all the more imperative for him to distance himself from the Ipperwash assault.

But thanks to the determined struggle of George's family and supporters, it has now been established that Harris and other top government officials met with top OPP officials just hours before the police raid and that Harris has repeatedly lied about the extent of his contacts with the OPP. A note drafted by the Deputy Attorney-General baldly states: "AG [Attorney-General] instructed by Premier that he desires removal of [the protestors] within 24 hours."

Harris and some three dozen other government officials are currently trying to find a legal means to circumvent an order from the province's Privacy Commissioner that they provide affidavits detailing the government-police discussions before the Ipperwash assault.

If Walkerton exemplifies the impact of the Tories' program of public spending cuts, privatization and deregulation, Ipperwash typifies the Tories' attitude to democratic rights.

For the Harris Tories, the "consensus" politics of the post-Second World War period are anathema. Whereas his predecessors made a pretence of ruling on behalf of all Ontarians, Harris has stigmatized the poor and welfare recipients, courted confrontation with the unions, and sought to criminalize dissent.

In feting Harris, the right-wing press have observed that his "Common Sense Revolution" blazed the trail for governments across Canada. There is much truth in this. Ministers in the federal Liberal government, including Prime Minister Jean Chretien, have frequently decried the policies and rhetoric of the Harris Tories. But the federal Liberals have pursued essentially the same program. Both governments imposed massive public spending cuts in the name of fighting the deficit. Both governments have

instituted a series of tax cuts designed to ensure the well-to-do appropriate a still greater share of the national income and that the state lacks the means to reinvest in public and social services.

That said, there is no question that the ruling class has been increasingly divided over the Harris Tory government's future course. One section has been arguing that the best way for the Tories to persevere in the face of mounting public opposition is by launching a "Common Sense Revolution Two," whose principal goals would be the removal of restrictions on for profit health-care and the dismantling of public education.

Another section, while in agreement that Medicare is "unsustainable," fears that the Tories lack the popular support and legitimacy to successfully mount a new offensive.

These divisions were at the root of a vitriolic dispute last summer between the *National Post*, the voice of unabashed reaction, and the liberal *Toronto Star*. In a series of comments and editorials, the *Post* charged the *Star* with fomenting violence, because one of its journalists had warned that the Tories' class war policies are leading to the growth of militant, extra-parliamentary opposition. Robert Fulford, a conservative literary critic, was rolled out by the *Post* to proclaim that what was at issue in the controversy was "civilization" itself: on one side, argued Fulford, were the Chretien-supporting *Star* and the mob and on the other, the Tories and all upholders of Western tradition.

Harris' hasty exit and the multiple crises enveloping the Tories underscore the narrow social base on which this government rests. Big business and the political elite have moved drastically to the right during the past decade. This shift caught working people unawares and their confusion has been compounded by their inability to defend their interests through electoral politics and trade union action. But the palpable alienation of the majority from the political establishment bespeaks a profound, but as of yet inchoate undercurrent of opposition.

Indeed, any objective reckoning of the development of class struggle over the past ten years would show that the Harris government came to power and survived only because of the complicity of the trade unions and social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

The NDP government of Bob Rae prepared the political terrain for Harris to come to power on an explicitly right-wing program modelled after the U.S. Republicans' "Contract with America." Elected in 1990, as working people sought a means to shield themselves from economic slump, the social democrats promptly shredded their reformist program and imposed steep social spending cuts, a wage- and job-cutting "social contract," and onerous tax hikes. Even the most notorious Tory policies, such as workfare and the contracting-out of water-testing, were pioneered by the Rae NDP government.

In 1996 and 1997, a wave of demonstrations and strikes erupted against the Tories' "Common Sense Revolution." But the unions and NDP worked to politically emasculate the resistance, insisting that the working class must not challenge to the Tories' "right to govern." Most notably, they torpedoed a strike by 120,000 public school teachers that even the corporate media conceded enjoyed overwhelming public support, after the courts had refused a Tory request for a strikebreaking injunction. In explaining why the

strike was being called off, one top union official said Harris' refusal to negotiate had rendered the teachers' action useless.

Soon after the Ontario Federation of Labour called a halt even to its protest campaign against the Tories, purportedly so it could concentrate on defeating the Harris Tories at the next election. To this end, one faction backed the NDP, while another, led by Canadian Auto Workers president Buzz Hargove, promoted a "strategic" vote for the Liberals. By the time of the elections, both opposition parties had indicted their acceptance of the key tenets of the "Common Sense Revolution," including Harris' cuts to welfare, social spending and taxes.

A second crucial lesson that needs to be drawn from the experience of the Harris government concerns the role of the media. Harris is a philistine and a political thug. Yet the media has promoted him as a powerful leader and regurgitated his lies. In reporting his resignation, there was little if any mention of the crises convulsing the Tory regime. Typical was a comment by the *Globe and Mail's* John Ibbitson. Having conceded the Harris Tories contributed to the Walkerton disaster through an oversight, Ibbitson hailed the outgoing Tory leader as Ontario's greatest politician in the twentieth century.

The *Globe's* editorial board was a little more circumspect. It expressed its support for the Harris record, but suggested his successor adopt a less confrontational style. This is a vain hope.

Whatever their initial rhetoric, Harris' successors will be prevailed upon by big business to intensify the assault against the working class and such a course cannot but provoke mass opposition. Significantly, the day before Harris announced his resignation, the federal Liberal government introduced legislation that, in the name of fighting terrorism, would allow the government to designate as terrorism many forms of political action and dissent, including strikes that do not conform with the extremely restrictive provisions of the federal and provincial labor codes.

For their part, working people must conclude from the experience of the Harris government and the ever-widening big business offensive on jobs, living standards and democratic rights, that they need to place their struggles on an entirely new axis through the building of a new mass socialist party.



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