

Ontario Tories unveil incendiary election platform

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The platform put forward by the Ontario Tories for the next election—which must be held sometime in the next ten months—is the most reactionary ever issued by a sitting government in Canada. *The Road Ahead* is a socially incendiary document that lays the fiscal and policy framework for the dismantling of what remains of public services, scapegoats the most vulnerable, and advocates draconian new restrictions on workers' rights, including the outlawing of all teachers strikes and an effective ban on union efforts to influence public policy.

Much of the Tory platform, especially its fiscal framework, is patterned after the class war policies of the Bush administration, which has pressed for massive tax cuts even as the US federal budget deficit has soared to almost half a trillion dollars.

Ontario is facing a major fiscal crisis due to anemic economic growth, repeated rounds of corporate and personal income tax cuts, the SARS crisis, and the Tory decision to cap consumer electricity rates after deregulation led to a dramatic spike in prices and a public outcry. The Dominion Bond Rating Service forecasts that Ontario will face a C\$1.9 billion budget shortfall this year. Other observers have said the deficit could reach as high as C\$5 billion. Yet *The Road Ahead* calls for a raft of new tax cuts, including further reductions in corporate and personal tax rates, making the interest on home mortgages tax-deductible, cutting property taxes for those over 65, and giving tax credits to those who send their children to private schools.

This scorched-earth fiscal policy is not only aimed at accelerating the redistribution of income from the poor and other working people to the rich and super-rich. It is designed to bankrupt the government, so as to compel further drastic cuts to public and social services.

The Road Ahead exemplifies both the unrelenting character of the big business assault on the social conquests of the working class and the crisis of the Ontario Tory regime. In the spring of 2002, Ernie Eves won the race to succeed Mike Harris as Tory leader and Ontario premier by presenting himself as a “gentler and kinder” conservative,

who would seek dialogue, rather than confrontation, with teachers and other opponents of Tory policies. Of course, this was largely pretence. As Harris's finance minister and deputy premier from 1995 to 2001, Eves had been one of the principal architects of the so-called Common Sense Revolution. Nonetheless, Eves's attempt to recast the Tories' image arose from a recognition that the puncturing of the stock market boom, Enron and other corporate scandals, the Walkerton water-poisoning tragedy, and the deterioration of public health care and education had eroded popular support for the Tories' unabashed pro-business agenda, riling even more privileged sections of the middle class that had voted Tory in 1995 and 1999.

With *The Road Ahead*, Eves has put paid to his attempts to recast the Tory image, embracing a series of policies, such as outlawing teachers strikes and forcing the homeless off the streets, that he had derided during the Tory leadership campaign as extremist. By calling for a new, more radical Common Sense Revolution, Eves is trying to mobilise the Tories' core of right-wing activists. Even more importantly, he is trying to win back the confidence of the Bay Street financial houses and other key sections of big business, which have been increasingly caustic in their criticism of his government for bending before popular opposition, particularly in regards to the privatisation and deregulation of the province's electricity system.

The *National Post*, the mouthpiece for the most rapacious sections of big business, was quick to praise the Tory election manifesto when it was published in May. Other sections of the corporate media have been more circumspect. Opinion polls show the Tories trailing far behind the Official Opposition Liberals. Moreover, the more conscious ruling class representatives recognise that the ever-widening social polarisation as well as the discrediting of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and the trade union officialdom threaten to give rise to an “extra-parliamentary” opposition movement that could go far beyond the mass protests that dogged the Harris Tory government between 1995 and 1997.

The Road Ahead consists of 18 policy papers that outline a gamut of reactionary initiatives. Some would abolish long-established rights. Others are “hot-button” issues—policies designed to whip up public anxiety and divert popular anger against the most vulnerable, the better to cover up the Tories’ criminal record in office and the injustices produced by the capitalist market.

* This spring’s SARS crisis exposed that the public health care system has been stretched to the breaking point by years of budget cuts and hospital closures. Predictably, the Tory manifesto makes mention of the health care crisis only to press for greater private sector involvement in the management and provision of health services. In their policy paper “Better health care for you and your family,” the Tories pledge to allow “more private clinics to open and offer high demand services such as blood tests and dialysis, with services to be covered by OHIP” (the provincial health insurance system). Claiming that the money doesn’t exist in the public purse, the Tories also outline a plan to rely on the private sector to build new hospitals.

* In a policy paper cynically titled “A workers’ bill of rights,” the Tories advocate legislation that would bar unions from spending money on anything other than collective bargaining unless specifically sanctioned in government-supervised, membership votes. Also, the Tories would empower any union local to end or change affiliation with an international union by a simple majority vote. Historically, the division of international unions along national lines has provided business with new means to wrest contract concessions by pitting workers against each other in competitive battles.

* A re-elected Tory government would make it illegal for teachers and all other school employees to strike or take any job action whatsoever during the school year. This would include the meagre work-to-rule campaigns that have characterised union resistance over the past two years. Under the pretext of ensuring extra-curricular activities for students, the Tories would allow the hiring of non-union and non-certified “specialist” teachers by school boards.

* In the name of giving more choice to parents, a Tory government would hasten passage of “the equity in education tax credit”—legislation giving parents up to C\$3,500 to send their child to private school.

* In keeping with the cowardly tactic of the far right in attacking the most vulnerable social layers, the Tory election platform pledges to supplement “workfare” and other initiatives aimed at forcing welfare recipients into low-paying jobs, with a campaign to drive the homeless off the streets. According to the Tory program, “Shared care teams” made up of outreach workers, nurses and physicians, and supported by psychiatrists, will be empowered to forcibly

remove the homeless from the streets “for their own protection.” While this has been phrased to sound like a humanitarian gesture, the true thrust of the initiative is revealed in the concluding sentence: “The police would be called in only as a last resort if necessary to protect the individual or members of the team.”

* Possibly the most pernicious sections of the Tory election program are those relating to immigrants. The Tories are proposing to launch a major crackdown on illegal immigrants using public health care and other government services, although there is no evidence that they are getting access to such services now, let alone that this is a major drain on the public purse.

* The Tories further promise to do away with another apocryphal social ill—the abuse of the system of legal aid by immigrants and refugees. Henceforth, the Tories would not allow either to have access to government-subsidised legal representation.

* In the section titled “A passport to Ontario,” the Tories announce their intention to wrest a share of immigration policy from the federal government. Citing agreements struck by Quebec and other provinces with the federal Liberal government on immigration, the document states, “We will negotiate our own immigration agreement with the federal government.” The Ontario government, declare the Tories, would “do a much better job than Ottawa has of screening for security risks, including people tied to terrorist or criminal organisations, those who have been previously deported, and anyone else who poses a security threat.”

The Tories’ anti-immigrant proposals and call for provincial control over immigration are a patent attempt to fan the anti-immigrant hysteria that has been whipped up since 9/11, and are a warning as to the malicious and duplicitous election campaign they intend to wage.



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