Ontario Tories launch reelection bid with vitriolic attacks

Keith Jones
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The Ontario Tories have launched their campaign for a third term in office with a series of vitriolic attacks on their big business Liberal opponents. Premier Ernie Eves has accused the Liberals of being beholden to the unions and favoring "tax and spend" economic policies that would drive Ontario into recession. The Liberals stand for "higher taxes, lost jobs, more teachers' strikes and a government controlled by special interest groups," proclaimed Eves shortly after announcing that Canada's most populous province will go to the polls October 2.

In truth, the Liberals have pledged to rescind only a handful of the most recent of the more than 250 tax cuts the Tories have instituted since coming to power in 1995. The Tory tax reductions have required devastating cuts to welfare, health care, education and other public and social services and have led to a massive redistribution of wealth upwards, from working people to the most privileged sections of the middle class, the rich and the super-rich. Yet the Liberals—Eves' rhetoric notwithstanding—would leave the fiscal framework of the Tories' Common Sense Revolution untouched.

The Tory election platform is even more incendiary then Eves' initial campaign speeches. "The Road Ahead" promises further corporate and personal income tax cuts, measures to promote private health care and schooling, a ban on teachers' strikes, changes to the labor code aimed at illegalizing all union political activity and legislation that would empower authorities to forcibly remove the homeless from the streets.

The tenor of the Tory reelection campaign is a measure both of the extent that official politics in Canada have lurched to the right and of the Tories' desperation as they find the public increasingly immune to their baiting of welfare recipients, immigrants and the unions. Even among more privileged sections of the middle class support for the Tories has been rattled by the puncturing of the stock market boom and a series of public health and safety crises tied to the Tories' cuts to public infrastructure. These include: the May 2000 contamination of Walkerton's water supply, which killed seven people and left a much larger number with permanent health problems; the SARS outbreak, which lasted far longer and was far more widespread in Ontario than any place outside of East Asia; and last month's failure of the Northeastern North American power grid.

For months opinion polls have shown the Tories trailing far behind the official opposition Liberals. If Eves nonetheless decided to meet the electorate this fall rather than next spring, it is because of Tory fears that their electoral prospects will only grow dimmer in the coming months. The economy has slowed sharply since the beginning of the year. A mounting fiscal crisis will soon compel the Ontario government to fill a shortfall of anywhere from $2 billion to $5 billion through spending cuts, the sell-off of government assets and increased user fees.

Energy analysts are warning Ontario could be hit by further blackouts this winter. And the Tories' attempts to cover up their role in ordering a 1995 police assault on an Indian protest at Ipperwash that resulted in the death of one protester are unraveling. Ontario's "assistant commissioner of the information and privacy act" recently demanded that the two Tory ministers in charge of law enforcement explain why for three years they fought a request for release of photographic and videotape images of the Ipperwash assault by falsely claiming that the images were sealed by police warrant.

The Liberals and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) are making appeals, albeit muted and circumscribed, to the public backlash against privatization and deregulation and the popular anger over the deplorable state of Ontario's public services.

On the first full day of the campaign, NDP leader Howard Hampton led reporters on an "Eves' of Destruction" tour of southwestern Ontario. It began with a visit to a meatpacking plant in Aylmer recently ordered closed on suspicion it illegally processed dead cow carcasses for human consumption. As part of their campaign against "big government," the Tories slashed the number of meat

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inspectors and transferred responsibility from the agriculture to the natural resources ministry. Hampton's next stop was Walkerton.

Hampton was a member of the NDP government of the early 1990s which paved the way for the coming to power of the Tories by declaring there was no alternative to the policy prescriptions of big business, slashing billions from public services, cutting the wages of one million public sector workers and pioneering workfare. But now Hampton is posing as a working man and with the campaign slogan "publicpower," trying to tap into growing popular hostility to big business.

The Liberals have proclaimed education and health care their top priorities. This is belied by a closer reading of their election platform. It accuses the Tories of failing to secure sufficient investment for Ontario and promotes public health care and education not as basic rights but smart investments that enhance Ontario's competitiveness.

Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty has attacked the Tories for scapegoating teachers and immigrants and otherwise dividing Ontarians. "They pick groups; they scapegoat people; they find a convenient target, some kind of political punching bag." Posturing aside, McGuinty and the Liberals are arguing that they could do at the provincial level what Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin have done in Ottawa. The federal Liberals have repeatedly used the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance as a foil, deriding their polices as divisive and reactionary. But the Liberal key socioeconomic initiatives—the balancing of the federal budget through massive public spending and the five-year tax program of tax cuts announced just before the 2000 election—were only slightly paler versions of those championed by the Reform-Alliance.

The eight-year-old Tory regime has spearheaded Canadian big business's assault on the social position of the working class. This began with a more than 20 percent cut in welfare payments and continued with the elimination of social housing, the abolition of any restrictions on the use of strikebreakers, the near-total removal of rent controls, the offloading of public services to financially strapped municipal governments, the ravaging of education, health care and environmental protection. Changes to the labor standards act were implemented allowing businesses to pressure workers into working 60 hours in a single week and without overtime pay.

But in sharp contrast to the 1999 election—when the corporate media unabashedly promoted the Tories and the Bay Street banks and financial houses filled the Tory coffers to overflowing—corporate Canada's support for the Tories has been tepid, at least thus far.

According to a report in the September 3 *Globe and Mai*l, corporate donations have fallen sharply and many business leaders are reluctant to publicly associate themselves with the Tory campaign. "There are a lot of people on Bay Street," said an unnamed Bay Street consultant, "who are fed up with Eves, but when they look at McGuinty's fiscal policy proposals they get pretty skeptical."

Behind the erosion of big business support for the Tories lie two inter-related, though contradictory, concerns. Bay Street was aghast when Eves, shortly after he succeeded Mike Harris as Tory leader and Ontario premier, bowed to popular pressure and abandoned a scheme to privatize the Crown-owned electrical transmission utility Hydro One. This reversal has fed fears that the Tories lack the resolve and popular legitimacy to make good on their promises to institute a further stage in their Common Sense Revolution. At the same time, the more astute ruling class representatives are raising fears about the increasing polarization of Canadian society and mounting popular disaffection with the entire political establishment.

That both the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Bay Street, and the *National Post*, which acts as the organ of the most rapacious sections of capital, have declared that support for the full deregulation of Ontario's electricity market should be a key test in determining which party should form the next government underscores that big business is at most contemplating a modest course correction.

Whichever party—Tory, Liberal or NDP—or combination of them forms the government after October 2, it will intensify the drive to subordinate all social needs to the profit requirements of big business. The key issue raised by the Ontario election is the urgent need for the working class to impose its own solution to increasing poverty, economic insecurity and social inequality through the building of a new party embracing workers in Canada and internationally and committed to a socialist program that places human need before the profits and incomes of the few.

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