Ontario Liberals preparing for power by shifting further right

Keith Jones
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Throughout the Ontario election campaign, which climaxes with today's vote, the Official Opposition Liberals have held a large, if not commanding, lead over the Tories in the opinion polls. Indeed, for the past two weeks the corporate media have proclaimed it all but a foregone conclusion that the Liberals will win the election, with only the size of their majority in doubt.

The governing party since June 1995, the Tories have responded by making ever more desperate and ludicrous charges against the big business Liberals, accusing them of being "soft" on crime and terrorism and wanting to destroy Ontario's economy with high taxes and runaway spending.

The corporate media have repeatedly criticized the Tories for running a mean-spirited and divisive campaign and highlighted numerous inconsistencies, errors and outright lies in the speeches of Ontario Premier and Tory leader Ernie Eves. This forms a marked contrast with the 1999 Ontario election. Then most of the media portrayed Eves' predecessor, Mike Harris, as a political titan—no matter that Harris had made his political career baiting welfare recipients and spouting the neoconservative aphorisms that his political handlers had drilled into his head. As for Dalton McGuinty, then as now the Liberal Party leader, whereas in 1999 he was portrayed as ill-prepared and eager to pander to teachers and other "special interest groups," today he is depicted as a premier-in-waiting.

Behind this shift lies the collapse of the ruling class consensus that sustained the Tories in power as they spearheaded Canadian big business's drive to slash public and social services and redistribute wealth from the poorest sections of society to the rich and super-rich through massive tax cuts.

No single factor accounts for the erosion in big business support for the Tories. The Walkerton water-poisoning tragedy, last spring's SARs crisis, and the August electricity blackout have caused some to question whether the Tories' reckless and ideologically motivated cuts to public infrastructure are not undermining Ontario's competitive position. There is also a recognition among more politically conscious elements of the ruling class that the Tories are so identified with big business and the stock market bubble of the late 1990s that they have become a lightning rod for popular opposition. That said, much, if not most, of the big business opposition to the Tories is rooted in the belief that under Eves the Tories became much too susceptible to public pressure. In particular, the Bay Street financial houses have not forgiven Eves for reversing Harris's decision to privatize Hydro One, the electrical transmission utility, which would have been the biggest IPO (Initial Public Offering) in Canadian history.

As Harris's deputy premier and finance minister for six years, Eves was one of the principal architects of the so-called Common Sense Revolution. But now he is derided by the business community as a waffler. "The fact is," one Bay Street executive told the *Globe and Mail*, Eves "doesn't have a well-defined belief system." According to the *Globe*, the traditional voice of Canada's corporate establishment, "few [in business] are mourning the expected end of the short-lived government of Ernie Eves."

The *Globe* itself called for the election of a Liberal government in an editorial that praised the right-wing policies implemented by Harris as "yes—common sense," then lashed out at Eves for his "flip-flops, phoniness, opportunism and bumbling."

McGuinty and the Liberals have responded to the likelihood that they will form Ontario's next government by moving further to the right. A pivotal

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point in the campaign—at least as far as big business is concerned—came when McGuinty appeared at the offices of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF), a right-wing lobby group hitherto associated with the Tories, and signed its pledge never to raise taxes or incur a budget deficit.

The Liberal Party election platform had already spelled out that the Liberals, their appeals to popular anger over the rapidly deteriorating public heath and education systems notwithstanding, would not reverse all but a handful of the Tories' more than 250 tax cuts. Nevertheless, McGuinty's submission to the CTF's demand that he sign their pledge was seen as a fitting demonstration of his commitment to "fiscal responsibility"—i.e., he would live within the fiscal framework dictated by the Harris Tories.

Faced with subsequent claims from the neoconservative Fraser Institute that Ontario is facing a $4 billion budget deficit this year, McGuinty has rushed to reaffirm that any government he leads will balance the books, adding that some Liberal promises may have to be delayed until 2007.

No doubt behind the scenes the Liberals are being even more categorical. According to the *Globe*'s senior political columnist, Jeffrey Simpson, the Liberals will accuse the Tories of having provided faulty budget projections to escape their campaign promises. "Ontarians understandably want a change from the Conservative years. What they think they're getting with the Liberals, will turn out to be something different than what they were promised."

In other words, a Liberal government will continue, if not intensify, the assault on public and social programs that can at least be traced back to the New Democratic Party (NDP) government of Bob Rae of the early 1990s.

Yet the trade union bureaucracy is hoping and working for a Liberal victory. They anticipate that unlike the Tories, a McGuinty-led Liberal government will give the union officialdom a seat at the table when formulating policy on behalf of big business. Thus the Liberals are strongly supportive of tripartite government-industry-union collaboration to attract new investment in the auto industry.

Canadian Auto Workers President Buzz Hargrove, while shying away from explicitly calling for "strategic voting"—that is, a vote for the Liberals rather that trade union-based NDP in constituencies where the Liberal candidate is more likely to win—as he did in 1999; nonetheless has said, "People know how to bring about a change of government and you don't do that by voting for somebody who doesn't have a prayer of winning. We are looking at information riding by riding, to see where there are opportunities to knock off a Tory."

Fearing that it could be reduced to less than 9 seats in the 103-seat Ontario legislature (which would deprive it of official party status), the social-democratic NDP has tried to accentuate its differences from the Liberals. But even then, it is proposing to return Ontario's tax rates to only what they were at the end of the Tories' first term in office. Just as importantly, the NDP continues to defend its record in government in the 1990s, when it launched massive social spending cuts, imposed job and wage cuts on a million public sector workers and pioneered the introduction of workfare.

The Ontario elections underscore that the official leadership of the working class has left it completely politically disenfranchised. If workers are to defeat the big business assault on living standards, public and social services and democratic rights, they must reconstitute themselves as an independent political force through the building of a new mass socialist party.

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