

The Ontario election: official politics shifts further right

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On October 10, voters in Ontario, Canada's most populous and industrialized province, will have the opportunity to choose from a slate of capitalist politicians offering empty promises of minor improvements to their lives.

In the official election debate, the real concerns of working people—the combat role now being assumed by the Canadian military in Afghanistan and elsewhere, persistent and deepening poverty for growing numbers, the lack of affordable housing, the destruction of decent manufacturing jobs, and the dismantling of public and social services—are either not mentioned or the object of crass posturing.

The current Liberal government, which came to power in the fall of 2003 with the explicit support of the labor bureaucracy, has made only minor and largely cosmetic adjustments to the Common Sense Revolution: the class-war measures implemented by the Tory governments of Mike Harris and Ernie Eves between 1995 and 2003.

With only one important exception—a regressive health-care tax—the Liberals have left in place the Tory tax regime. This regime had a double purpose: to swell corporate profits and the incomes of the rich and super-rich and to starve the state of the means to sustain social programs and decent public services.

Almost immediately on taking office the Conservatives slashed welfare rates by 22 percent, then froze them for their eight subsequent years in office. Yet the Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty has raised welfare rates by just 5 percent over the past four years, condemning 760,000 people, mostly single mothers and children, to dire poverty. Postsecondary tuition fees, meanwhile, have been allowed to rise far faster than the inflation rate and the Conservatives' antiunion laws remain on the books.

With the assistance of the union bureaucracy—which is gratified by the readiness of McGuinty, unlike Harris, to concede the unions a role in the restructuring of public services to better suit the needs of big business—the Liberals are posturing in this election as defenders of public services. But the monies the Liberals have re-injected into health care, education, and municipal and other services fall far short of the infrastructure and personnel deficits caused by the cuts carried out by the Conservatives and the New Democratic Party government of the 1990s and by a rapidly expanding population.

Two issues have dominated the campaign: The record of broken promises of the incumbent Liberals and the widely unpopular proposal of Conservative leader John Tory to extend public funding to faith-based, i.e., religious, schools.

The list of broken Liberal promises is indeed extensive, from McGuinty's failure to fix the funding formula for public schools, to his broken pledge to phase out coal-fired power stations, to his broken promise to bring private hospitals into the public sector so as to

staunch the privatization of health care.

But the debate over McGuinty's broken promises has largely been framed by the corporate media and his big business political opponents and, consequently, has focused not on his perpetuation of the right-wing Tory agenda, but rather his failure to honor a pledge not to increase taxes.

This tax promise was made to the right-wing Canadian Taxpayers Federation in the midst of the 2003 campaign and with the purpose of reassuring big business, lest there was any doubt, that the Liberals would leave the main pillars of the Common Sense Revolution in place.

And they have done just that. In fact, McGuinty's health-care tax is in keeping with the Common Sense Revolution in that it is a measure whose burden falls disproportionately on the less well-off sections of society. For a person earning \$30,000 the \$900 annual health tax constituted a whopping 24 percent tax increase, while for someone making \$200,000 the increase was a paltry 3 percent.

In reality, the tax is more a premium—a mandatory charge for being enrolled in the Ontario Health Insurance Plan—than a traditional tax.

If big business and the media have focused their attention on the health tax it is not because they are concerned about the real burden it constitutes for working people, but because they want to pressure the next Ontario government into making tax cuts for big business and the well-off a top priority.

While there is real popular anger over McGuinty's broken promises, the record of the previous Harris/Eves Conservative government is still painfully fresh in the minds of Ontario workers. The criminal erosion of social infrastructure that led to or compounded such disasters as the fatally poisoned water system in Walkerton in 2000, the outbreak of SARS, and the electrical blackout of 2003 were the direct result of the Tories' privatization and tax-and-budget cutting program.

Mindful of lingering public mistrust, the Conservatives have tried to distinguish their new leadership, under the aptly named John Tory, from that of the union- and welfare-baiter Mike Harris. However, if anything, Tory has much closer connections to the corporate elite. He is a former CEO of Rogers Media, one of the largest media companies in the country, and his father was a close advisor to Canada's wealthiest businessman, the late Kenneth Thomson.

Despite the outpouring of commentary that has surrounded Tory's proposal to extend public funding to faith-based schools, little light has been shed on the matter in the course of the election campaign.

It is a complex question but certain basic points need to be made. No side in the public debate has taken a principled stand in defense of public education and exposed this policy for what it is—a reactionary

measure. It is an ideological accommodation of the religious right and, if implemented, would constitute a major expansion of the private school system in the guise of expanding the public one. Tory's plan calls for an \$800 million increase in education funding, half of which would go to religious schools over the next year, climbing to an increase of \$2.4 billion by 2011-12.

It should be explained that only a few provinces continue to extend funding to Catholic schools as a result of a constitutional arrangement that predates Confederation. But Ontario is the only province that fully funds Catholic education while not providing any funding to other faith-based schools, a situation which even the United Nations has denounced.

Given the changing face of Ontario schools, which now have a cultural diversity virtually unparalleled in the world, the funding of a Separate (Catholic) School Board alongside a public one is increasingly at odds with social reality and seen as a political anachronism. The obvious solution would be to have a single, publicly funded secular school system, but that, of course, is not being proposed by any of the major parties.

John Tory had sought to use the incongruity in educational funding to advance a retrograde political agenda. But this has backfired badly, eliciting condemnation not only from the general public, who are overwhelmingly opposed to the proposal, but even from his own supporters on Bay Street and a member of the outgoing Tory caucus in the Ontario legislature, Bill Murdoch.

At the beginning of the last election, polls showed that health care was the number one issue of concern to voters. At that time, Ontario faced physician and nurse shortages, and delays in waiting-times for surgery, largely because the previous Conservative government had slashed health-care funding and eliminated regulations requiring minimum standards of care.

The Liberals' introduction of an onerous health tax was justified as needed to meet soaring health-care costs. Yet in four years there has been little improvement in the health-care system and in many respects it has worsened. The problem of long wait times for both emergency and routine treatment has not been addressed and there continues to be a dire shortage of family doctors.

The failure of the Liberals to reverse the crisis in the public education system as well as in health care has been used by the Conservatives to argue for further privatization. Although Tory has adamantly refused to retract his proposal for funding religious schools he has attempted to shift the focus to other matters—most notably a proposal to allow doctors greater “flexibility” in providing care from private clinics—a measure more in line with the agenda for privatization that has won him and his party the backing of important sections of big business.

The social-democratic NDP comes into this election flagging in the polls and holding only 11 seats out of a total of 103. In the 2003 election, the NDP won just seven seats, their lowest total since 1963, and for a time lost official party status. But they have won a number of by-elections by appealing to popular disenchantment with the McGuinty Liberals.

Nevertheless, according to opinion polls, support for the NDP is little more than half of what it was during the two decades prior to the social democrats forming Ontario's government between 1990 and 1995. Workers have not forgotten how the NDP government of Bob Rae, which came to power promising to protect working people from a deepening recession, moved sharply to the right and hiked taxes, imposed a wage- and job-cutting “social contract” on a million public

sector workers, and pioneered “workfare.”

It was these right-wing policies that paved the way for the coming to power of the Conservatives in 1995.

The NDP has adapted to its weakened position by offering itself as a lever to pressure any new government for modest changes, outlined in a six-point election program. These include a 50 percent reduction in the health tax, an increase in the minimum wage to \$10 an hour, and a rollback in tuition fees.

With polls showing there is a good prospect of a minority government, the NDP is hoping to win “strategic” votes from workers who continue to view it as a means of prodding the traditional governing parties of big business, the Liberals and Tories, for concessions. In recent statements regarding the prospect of propping up a Liberal minority government NDP leader Howard Hampton could hardly contain his enthusiasm: “The reality of a minority government in Ontario today is you would have to deal with New Democrats and we're going to insist on a progressive agenda.”

Hampton has tried to distinguish his NDP from that of Bob Rae by pointing to the fact that Rae is now a Liberal. Yet Hampton himself was an important member of the Rae government and played a key role in its attack on the working class. It should also be remembered that the federal NDP under Jack Layton had no compunction about maintaining the Martin Liberals in office, although the Martin-Chretien Liberal government was Canada's most right-wing since the Great Depression.

While Hampton hopes to be in a position to offer the Liberals the social democrats' support after October 10, a large section of the union officialdom is openly campaigning for a Liberal government and in an even more explicit fashion than in the 1999 and 2003 Ontario elections.

The unions, with the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) under Buzz Hargrove in the lead, first advocated “strategic” voting in the 1999 election, after they had suppressed the mass movement that had erupted against the Harris Tories. This movement reached its highpoint in the fall of 1997 when teachers mounted a political strike.

In this election, the Steelworkers, Machinists, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) continue to back the NDP while the CAW, two teachers' unions, and several of the building trades have formed a coalition called “working families” that is calling for a “strategic” vote against the Conservatives, which in a majority of ridings means calling for a vote for the Liberals.

At this stage in the election campaign there is no way of predicting a clear outcome, but this much can be said: Whatever party or alliance of parties forms the government, workers and their families will face an accelerating assault on their social position.



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