

Ontario Liberals retain power, as voter participation plummets

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The Liberals have retained power in Ontario, Canada's most populous and industrialized province, winning 71 of the 107 seats in the provincial legislature in Wednesday's general election.

The corporate media have proclaimed the Liberal election victory a "triumph," but the Liberals actually lost more than 200,000 votes compared to the 2003 election and saw their share of the popular vote slashed by 4.3 percentage points, to 42.2 percent.

With voter participation at an historic low of 52.8 percent, the Liberals barely won the support of one in five Ontario voters.

Four years ago, the Liberals won office by making a calibrated appeal to popular anger over the dramatic cuts to public and social services carried out by an avowedly right-wing Conservative government that modeled itself after the US Republicans.

The Liberals are the traditional governing party of Canadian big business at the federal level and during the period of the Mike Harris-Ernie Eves Ontario Conservative government (1995-2003), the federal Liberal government of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin implemented social spending and tax-cutting policies little different from those of the Ontario Tories.

Nevertheless, much of the union bureaucracy explicitly supported Dalton McGuinty's Liberals in the 2004 election and the rest tacitly supported the election of a Liberal government.

Predictably, the McGuinty Liberal government left the key pillars of the Common Sense Revolution of their Tory predecessors untouched. Funding for health care, education and municipal services was increased, but by far less than was needed to reverse the Tory cuts and to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding population. The Liberals left in place the Harris-Eves tax regime, which was skewed to bloat the incomes of big business and the most affluent layers of society. The sole exception was their introduction of a regressive health care tax, whose burden not only falls most heavily on the working poor, but which effectively violates the principal of free, universal public health care.

The Harris-Eves Tories mounted a vindictive campaign against welfare recipients, slashing welfare benefits by 21 percent soon after taking office. After four years of Liberal rule, welfare rates remain below what they were prior to the Conservatives coming to power in 1995 not only in purchasing power, but even in nominal dollar, terms.

Nor did the Liberals repeal most of the Harris government's antiunion legislation.

Yet in this year's election much of the union bureaucracy was even more openly supportive of the Liberals than in 2003. Through "Working Families," a lavishly funded advocacy group, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), teachers', and building-trades unions worked with Liberal Party insiders to mount a campaign "to remind voters

what it was like four years ago, what has changed and what's at stake for working families"—in other words, to stump for the Liberals by promoting the lie that they have and will defend public and social services.

Six days before the election, CAW President Buzz Hargrove gave an interview to the *Toronto Star* in which he extolled the virtues of the McGuinty Liberals and denounced the social-democratic NDP, which he accused of not "understand[ing] economics."

"I see absolutely no reason to vote NDP," said Hargrove, who then claimed that the Liberals have "been more left than the NDP over the past four years."

In justifying his pro-Liberal stand, Hargrove pointed to the wage- and job-cutting "social contract" the Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae, which held office from 1990-95, imposed on one million public sector workers.

There is no question that the NDP led a right-wing election campaign, tailored toward proving the party is fiscally responsible and not anti-business. It failed even to call for the immediate abolition of the Liberals' punitive health care tax. NDP leader Howard Hampton made clear that the NDP's fondest hope was to be able to win enough seats to hold the Liberals to a minority and thereby place the NDP in the position to barter its parliamentary support.

But Hargrove's attack on the NDP was from the standpoint of joining hands with the Ontario's corporate elite—even the traditional pro-Conservative organ of the Bay Street financial establishment, the *Globe and Mail*, editorialized in favor of McGuinty—in helping to re-elect a right-wing Liberal government.

Ironically, former NDP Premier Bob Rae, who joined the federal Liberal Party in 2003, was, like Hargrove, to be found supporting the Liberals in Wednesday's election.

Between 1993 and 1995, the CAW president postured as the leader of the union bureaucracy's protest campaign against the NDP's assault on public sector workers and the services that they provide—an assault that paved the way for the coming to power of the Harris Tories in the 1995 election. Hargrove's "left-wing" posturing was based on the labor cost advantage the Big Three auto makers then enjoyed in Canada, due to the lower Canadian dollar and Canada's state-run medical insurance scheme. As the dollar gap has closed and the Big Three have come under increased competition, Hargrove has stampeded to the right, imposing job and wage-cuts, working with the auto bosses and Ontario and federal governments to boost productivity through the Canadian Auto Partnership Council, lobbying for massive grants and tax concessions for GM, Ford and Chrysler, and emerging as the keenest union promoter of the Liberal Party.

At the outset of the campaign, Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty

sought to frame the election as a referendum on the Conservative proposal to extend the current practice of government funding for Roman Catholic schools to all “faith-based” schools. As even the corporate media pointed out, if McGuinty seized on this as a “wedge-issue,” it was because in so many other respects the Liberal and Conservative programs were alike.

The Conservative proposal to provide state funding for faith-based schools—at an initial cost of \$400 million per year—was doubly reactionary. It was aimed at promoting religious backwardness and, in the name of expanding the public school system, to actually promote private education. And for these reasons many Ontarians were outraged by the Conservative proposal.

But McGuinty’s defence of the “public school system” was hypocritical and, moreover, largely motivated by elite concerns that Canada’s multiculturalism policy has gone too far and become an impediment to promoting the type of robust state-defined “national identity” that it needs to mobilize support for its policies at home and abroad.

While attacking the Conservatives for wanting to fund Jewish and Muslim schools, McGuinty and the Liberals glossed over their support for the continued state funding of Catholic schools. The premier began a televised leaders’ debate with a veiled appeal to anti-Muslim sentiment, warning that the Conservatives’ plan to promote faith-based schools would mean “strife in the streets” of the kind witnessed in “Paris and London.”

The Conservatives’ faith-based schools proposal badly backfired. The *Globe and Mail* denounced the aptly named Conservative leader, John Tory, for wasting his energies on the issue, when in their view he should have been championing health care privatization and more tax cuts.

Facing increasing dissension within this own party, Tory effectively scuttled the pledge, a week before the election, by announcing that if the Conservatives won the election they would allow a “free vote” on the issue.

But the Conservative campaign never recovered. On Wednesday, the Conservatives won just 26 seats, almost all of them rural, and saw their share of the popular vote fall by a further 3 percentage points from the disastrous 2003 election, to 31.7 percent. Tory himself failed to win a seat.

NDP leader Howard Hampton complained that the faith-based schools issue had drowned out his party’s message, but the fact is that the social democrats are rightly perceived by large numbers of Ontarians as another establishment, pro-big business party.

The NDP, which held office little more than 12 years in Ontario, saw its popular vote rise by 2 percent to 16.8 percent and won 10 seats, three more than in 2003, but one less than when it entered the campaign.

The Greens, who have never elected a single member in a Canadian legislature, saw their share of the popular vote more than triple to 8.1 percent.

Alongside the parliamentary election, a referendum was held Wednesday on whether to change Ontario’s election system, from the current highly undemocratic, first-past-the-post model to a so-called Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system. The latter system continues to provide for electoral ridings whose representatives are chosen by the first-past-the-post method, but also provides for additional seats that are distributed so as to give the parties a proportion of the total seats in the legislature roughly equal to their share of the popular vote.

The proposed reform was rejected by 63 percent of those who voted in the referendum.

This was in part because the MMP system had been little publicized and poorly explained.

But the major reason the election reform proposal went to defeat was that it was adamantly opposed by the ruling establishment. The corporate media denounced it as a formula for political instability, and for the proliferation of political parties—even though the proposed system would have established an inordinately high bar of a minimum 3 percent share of the popular vote for a party to gain parliamentary representation.

Typical was an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* that complained, “Like outright proportional representation,” the MMP system “would result in parties needing to win at least 50 percent of the popular vote in order to form a majority government.”

“Research,” continued the *Globe*, “suggests that, had this version of MMP been in place, no Ontario party would have won a majority in the past 20 years. ... it would also have meant no Common Sense Revolution under Mike Harris in 1995 and no clear victory by the Liberals in 2003—both results that ... handed those governments the tools to implement tough policies.”

The liberal *Toronto Star* was of the same opinion: “The proposed system is a formula that stands a high chance of producing weak, unstable minority governments that are beholden to small, single-interest parties

“No one suggests that first-past-the post is perfect. But Ontario’s current system is democratic and robust, delivering strong, stable government that works. Why strain to ‘fix’ what isn’t broken?”

The ruling capitalist elite has tremendous resources at its disposal, including the corporate media, to mould public opinion, suppress debate and manipulate the outcome of elections. Yet it perceives even a minor reform in the direction of having the distribution of legislative seats better reflect the real popular support for parties as threatening and rallies in defence of an electoral system where governments are insulated from having to seek public support for four to five years because it finds such “strong governments” more effective in upholding its interests.

Ontario’s three major parties opposed electoral reform, either openly as in the case of the Conservatives or covertly as with the Liberals and the NDP.

The Liberals professed neutrality, but established a very high threshold for the referendum to pass (60 percent of the vote and majorities in at least 60 percent of the 107 electoral districts or ridings).

The NDP claimed to be supportive of the change, but refused to campaign in its favor, claiming, falsely, that the referendum law prevented MPPs [Members of the Provincial Parliament] from advocating electoral reform.

The ruling elite’s overwhelming opposition to a modest step toward a more democratic form of popular representation is indicative of its increasing hostility toward basic democratic principles.



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