

# Limited Horizons: Ontario's Election and After

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There are two initial observations to be made of Ontario's October 10<sup>th</sup> election. First and foremost, the voter turnout: the lowest voter turnout to date had been 54.7 percent of the potential electorate, recorded in 1923. This was 'bested' on October 10<sup>th</sup> when those motivated to cast a vote fell to a new record low of 52.8 percent. Declining turnout has been a consistent trend since 1995, when turnout was a full ten points higher than this last election. Given the serious economic and environmental issues confronting Ontario this is indeed cause for serious concern. There was an opportunity to mobilize and galvanize workers and students around a range of issues of importance. These included: the meltdown of Ontario's manufacturing sector, sharp social polarization of incomes and wealth (particularly in Toronto), renewed momentum for nuclear energy, and a referendum on electoral reform. Yet, an army of Ontario citizens was less than motivated in what the parties had to say to vote.

The second point is the actual result: the Liberals took 71 seats, the Conservatives 26 seats, and the NDP 10. For the governing Liberals, it was a loss of 1 seat compared to the election four years ago, and a decline in their total vote by 4.2 percent. The hapless Tories gained two seats, while their popular vote dropped by 2.4 percent. And the NDP gained 3 seats, although two of these were holds from previous by-election wins; their popular vote climbed a modest 2.1 percent. The Greens won no seats but won 8 percent of the vote, a gain of 3.7 percent. Yet, Premier Dalton McGuinty and the Liberal's victory has been heralded as the consolidation of a new political dynasty!

The electoral disinterest is not without explanation. Another round of neoliberalism was clearly all that was on offer between all the parties, including the Greens and the NDP. Small differences do matter, and there were mild differences in the platforms of the four parties with respect to adjustments in social spending, public schooling, proportional representations and modest refurbishing of a declining public infrastructure. But the Conservative, Green and Liberal party positions all openly favoured the pro-market, pro-business agenda of neoliberalism.

The NDP's proposals were absent any sense of current power structures, ideas for building up new platforms for democracy, or significant breaks from neoliberal fiscal and administrative policies. For the NDP, the Green's rise in vote and platform in several key areas raises serious questions for its viability as a meaningful electoral agent. Its position as a vehicle for substantive reform has long been sacrificed. This requires some elaboration.

## Empty Slogans: "Go Orange!"

For Ontario's New Democrats, the fall election was yet another disappointing result in a string since the defeat of the Bob Rae government in the mid-1990s, after its turn to neoliberal policies. The NDP went into the fall election with ten seats and came out with the same. One new seat was won in Hamilton, but the winner of a Toronto by-election some months ago was unable to retain the seat. The vote increase by 2.1 percent over 2003 to a total of 16.8 percent of the province-wide popular vote is still well below the NDP's pre-Rae government average of 24 percent. The New Democrats came very close in several more ridings, including one lost by a miniscule 36 votes.

But voters in many ridings with a history of voting for the New Democrats were not sufficiently moved in sufficient numbers to cast a vote for what historically had been their party. The NDP slogan of "Go Orange" rang hollow, sounding like some over-priced consultant's "bright idea." It was a slogan empty of content and it failed to motivate voters generally, or to speak to workers particularly.

The NDP campaign platform consisted of six proposals: (1) a \$450 health tax rebate for those earning under \$48,000; (2) an immediate increase in the minimum wage to \$10/hr.; (3) an environmental 'right to know' law which would require that manufacturers divulge what toxins they are releasing into the environment; (4) an addition of \$200 per student into Ontario's education system; (5) a tuition fee roll-back to 2003 levels; and (6) improved home care and thus reduced wait times. In many respects it was similar, though not as fulsome as the Liberal platform.

The cliché assessment of the NDP in Canadian politics is 'liberals in a hurry.' This was an agenda for 'liberals at a crawl.' It was the sort of program any public servant (or party consultant with the usual array of public relations and polling flacks) might cobble together. It bore little resemblance to the struggles of key movements at the moment (and, bizarrely, even some of the things Hampton and the NDP had spent the last Legislature working on, such as energy and wider living incomes issues).

In a time of neoliberalism, the agenda might generously be considered as a set of helpful proposals, at least partly inconsistent with more market-based measures. But that would indeed be generous. It was not a coherent program built around a vision of a more equal, democratic and sustainable economy. NDP officials, when asked 'why these items?', simply responded: they were easily implementable should the NDP be in a position to shape the agenda of a minority government. This was political clumsy thinking: narrow the agenda as much as possible before the election; run a campaign that is symbolic, about broken promises and features the agenda as a marginal feature; and then hope to negotiate over a few flimsy items in the election platform in the event of a minority government. It is all too easy to point out that this left an impoverished program, a tactical political calculation lacking in imagination, and the failure to appeal to any particular voting constituency.

Industrial decline, the growing gap between rich and poor, environmental decay and global warming, and an alternate energy policy, for examples, were all possible campaigning issues for social democrats. These would have partly staked out alternate political options and challenged Liberal policies. Plans for more rapid pacing of minimum wages, more information on pollution or minor increments to home care provisions were not going to excite anybody in particular, and were only going to draw, as they did, a big yawn from the Liberals and voters.

In the last week of the campaign, NDP party leader Howard Hampton berated the media for ignoring the key issues of the campaign with their obsession with the faith-based schools proposal floated by Conservative leader John Tory. He had a point, as the state and private mass media have both become ever more facile and subordinate to capitalist interests in their political coverage. The image and spectacle has, indeed, come to dominate over analysis of ruling interests and the struggles of

everyday life in news coverage. But this was also Hampton and the NDP stunningly failing to take responsibility for the dreary emptiness of their “Go Orange” campaign. There was none of the larger problems confronting Ontario’s working people being addressed in the NDP’s campaign either.

Hampton’s lame griping also spoke to the NDP’s own pathetic failure to promote a single public school system, and use this as a basis to attack the spread of private and charter schools, when given the massive opening to do so by the Conservative platform and public controversy. The Greens, in contrast, immediately made funding for Catholic schools a key position and unequivocally stated that all education should be secular. This distinguished the Greens from the rest. Moreover, along with the stronger position in favour of ‘yes’ in the referendum for proportional representation, the Greens re-tacked their campaign to exploit these differences with the other parties.

The NDP, in contrast, banally mimicked the Liberals and defended the status quo. This was a position that dates back to the NDP’s sordid back-room support for the extension of Catholic school funding in the 1980s. The NDP’s burying of support for proportional representation in the referendum confirmed the status-quo reading by the electorate as well. Across the array of issue, the NDP was barely distinguishable from the Liberals. They both occupy what exists as the ‘centrist’ political space in an era of neoliberalism.

The success of the Greens in winning 8 percent of the popular vote spells trouble for the NDP. The Green showing can be interpreted several ways. But there can be little doubt that the Greens, in the electoral imagination and their own self-identification (something clearly less true for, say, the German Greens who have become cold militarist political calculators), stand for something good and positive: defence of the environment and spread of democratic participation. There are, indeed, serious political questions to be directed at the Green’s proposals. They have, for example, thoroughly embraced market ecology. Their vision of society is one comprised almost wholly of consumers and small “off-the-grid” entrepreneurs. But that is not the point here. They embody a vision. The old-line parties saw their vote drop more than 7 percent in this election. Rather than cast their lot with the NDP, the Greens were the primary beneficiary of voter dissatisfaction. But the Greens also gained support for the positive vision of a single, secular public school system, a more inclusive voting system and improved ecology and energy policies.

The NDP programmatic stance today, in Ontario but equally in other provinces and nationally, is much less clear than the Greens. The Ontario NDP electoral campaign further muddied matters. Historically, labourist parties like the NDP have been parties of protest, of incremental reforms to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism and parties of unions and workers. Those angry with the two bourgeois parties would vote for the New Democrats, and support positive measures for redistribution, the extension of public space, more activist economic policy and democratic reform. But this linkage between political support and modest progressive policies against business interests is now broken. Social democracy’s “Third Way” policies of better training, support for creative high-tech industries, global trade and less government policy activism are wholly consistent with neoliberalism. The Liberal Party of Ontario has equally been capable of implementing these same policies as an alternative to the hard right policies of the Conservatives under Mike Harris. Even standing for a single secular school system was too much of an electoral gamble for today’s NDP: the movement of protest and reformism that the NDP arguably was once is now completely gone. In increasing numbers, so, too, is the support of unions and workers.

### **Ontario’s Divided Unions and Working Class**

The NDP’s electoral timidity and programmatic drift has added to the divisions within Ontario’s

working class. It is no secret that since the Rae government of the early 1990s, various Ontario unions and indeed large parts of the NDP's political base have become - and continue to be indifferent - toward their traditional political home. The weakness in NDP voting strength since the 1990s is a function of this history.

The impasse is also a result of the failure of the Days of Action of the late 1990s, particularly the union leadership but also significant components of social justice networks, to keep pushing on with the political struggle against the Tories and neoliberalism. This would have required either remaking the NDP, which would have clearly gone against the historical trajectory of social democratic parties and their rejection of extra-parliamentary mobilization and militancy and their 'third way' accommodation of neoliberalism; or creating a new political organization built in extra-parliamentary movement struggles and widening the ideological space for political alternatives. The leaderships of both the unions and social justice organizations across Ontario rejected both these options.

Instead, most unions and their leaders, particularly public sector unions like CUPE and private sector unions like USW, collapsed into a simple electoral compact with the NDP, and took a pass on further social movement building and political mobilization. In some cases, this has still meant continued solid activist campaigns, such as the USW pensions and restructuring fights at Stelco in Hamilton, or the UNITE-HERE hotel organizing campaigns in Toronto. Some local labour councils, as in Toronto under the leadership of John Cartwright, have also engineered innovative organizing campaigns. But there is silence from these unions about the political level these campaigns must eventually be fought at, and unquestioning allegiance to the NDP electoral machine. This is the case even when the NDP offers so little in return. Political crumbs are better than nothing in an era of neoliberalism.

Since the late 1990s, other unions drifted away from the NDP to form a loose political entente with the Liberals. Notably, the CAW used the personal rupture of Buzz Hargrove with the NDP as a cover as the CAW leadership moves increasingly toward competitive unionism and political conservatism. They have been joined in the entente with the Liberals by other unions in the building trades, commercial sectors and white-collar professions. This is the return of old-style North American Gompersism: get whatever you can for your existing members, from whomever you can, and wherever you can as long as the bargaining terms retain some formal semblance of independent unions. In a period of neoliberal globalization, this is the embrace of international competitiveness, company loyalty and teamwork and corporate subsidies as the practical ideology of unions.

Public sector professional unions have often felt most comfortable with such an orientation, as union practices then mesh with ideology and policies their members are actually implementing. The CAW transition over the last decade has been breath-taking: from social unionism and concessions-fighting to competitive unionism and engineering agreements with givebacks and no-strike clauses. In the 1990s, the CAW and other unions were in battle with the so-called 'pink paper' unions calling for a new approach to bargaining and policies that the NDP should pursue. They were then rejecting such revisionism and calling for greater militancy. The CAW left the Ontario Federation of Labour, and keeping the dues that went with membership for independent and more 'radical' political work. The CAW now positions itself to the political right of these unions and has gone far beyond them in adjusting to neoliberal times.

The union division took an additional form in the last election with the creation of an advocacy group called 'Working Families'. The group was composed of the CAW, two teachers' unions and several of the building trades unions. While the group did not endorse any particular party, its efforts could be seen as an endorsement of the programme and record of the McGuinty Liberals as opposed to the former Conservatives. The 'Working Families' coalition represents an organized break with the NDP.

It is fuelled by short-term brokerage politics and deal-making by certain labour elites who can strike a bargain for their specific organized sector. The longer-term political and cultural significance of this development cannot be diminished.

In both the cases of a re-embrace or desertion of the NDP, social unionism has given way to pragmatic politics and competitive unionism. Each is reflective of a defensive posture in the face of neoliberalism. Not one union and not one union leadership in Ontario has moved toward a more militant posture of class struggle unionism since the Days of Action mobilisation. The union support that underpinned the social justice networks across Ontario, and numerous cross-union social movement campaigns, has been extensively withdrawn. And if support for social campaigns has not been completely withdrawn, it is more a case of unions 'contracting-out' the political work to poorly-paid campaigners, with little effort to mobilize their own memberships to form real community-union-movement relations. There has been little in the way of new political directions taken at the levels of the CLC, the OFL or district labour councils. No new anti-neoliberal alliances have formed. Neoliberalism in Ontario is uncontested at the level of organized political forces, although it meets opposition in the everyday resistances of people's lives as they cope with its consequences.

This political fracturing and drift has meant that all the efforts at organizing in new sectors, reaching out to racial and ethnic minorities facing social polarisation and precarious work situations, and supporting immigrant workers' rights take place in an unfavourable social context. There are no wider political supports, campaigning resources, and ideological supports for this necessary work. Very good conferences, successful particular campaigns, and inspiring strikes for rights no doubt occur. But there is no new organization of social forces, ideologically or in new political formations, which represents a shifting - or the potential to shift - the overall balance of political power. Elections in liberal democracies are limited events, mainly serving as a momentary barometer of political conflict and power. The fall election in Ontario registered the further consolidation of neoliberalism, the programmatic disarray of the NDP and the continued fracturing of progressive political forces.

## **The McGuinty Liberals and "One Ontario" into 2008**

Since the election victory, the majority Liberal government has been barely visible despite the mounting economic difficulties and the deep-seated problems confronting Ontario. The main shift with the second McGuinty term, and the departure of Finance Minister Greg Sorbara from Cabinet, has been a concentration of power in the Premier's Office, with a capacity for increased administrative control over the range of Ministries. The new legislature met for only eight sessions in the fall, and Cabinet has only met six times. The concentration of executive power and the relative decline of parliamentary bodies has been a characteristic of neoliberalism.

The incrementalism of the election agenda in terms of the environment, education, health, and fiscal policies has meant little urgency for new initiatives. Only four bills were introduced, and one piece of legislation passed.

The first act of the freshly re-elected Liberals was to proceed with making February 18<sup>th</sup> a new statutory holiday - Family Day. A day off in the heart of winter has been talked about in Ontario ever since Alberta enacted such a holiday 15 years ago. No one will complain about an extra day off, although business interests have been bemoaning what they perceive as additional costs. But, if the government really wanted to do something for families in a substantive way they could have amended the Employment Standards Act to provide for paid leave to care for children, elderly parents and/or sick days. There is also the need to add an additional week of vacation time to

Ontario's meagre two weeks.

On January 1, 2008, the Ontario Liberals demonstrated their main policy response to the rise in the value of the Canadian dollar, the crisis of the manufacturing sector and the turmoil in the financial markets. Effective on that day, the capital tax was eliminated for businesses in the manufacturing and resource sectors. The Liberals further resolved that the capital tax for all business would be reduced to 21 per cent and be eliminated entirely over the next three years. Other than this, McGuinty's main economic policy has been to badger the Federal government for increased subsidies for the manufacturing and resource sectors, adjustment of Employment Insurance regulations to allow easier access and mild support for lower interest rates and dollar.

To their credit, the government jump-started \$1.4 billion in infrastructure projects including public transit. But these projects will likely be used to expand the public-private partnerships agenda, even in the face of the mounting evidence of the enormous additional cost overruns from such projects and the loss of future government revenues. And this spending is a drop in a bucket against the collapsing public infrastructure across the province. The provincial budget to be tabled in April or May will signal more of the Liberal agenda, than was announced in the largely bare December Throne Speech. An economic slowdown and less tax revenues is likely to mean a return to tough bargaining for public sector workers, and more aggressive efforts to find space for business interests in the production and delivery of public services.

As the Ontario economy enters into rougher waters, it is difficult to imagine the Liberals striking new policy departures or breaking with fiscal conservatism. They have balked at even a consistent "up-loading" of the social service costs dumped on Ontario's cities. They may well ratchet-up the rhetoric around "employability," "self-reliance" and "skills" as the only real job insurance. There will be no massive public works beyond projects already on-line and certainly no upgrading of our social assistance program. The politics of "One Ontario" will reveal itself by summer 2008.

### **Hard Lessons (Again) for the Socialist Left**

There are two further hard lessons for the left to take account from the election and the new session of the Legislature in 2008. First, there is a clear relationship to the disorganization and political drift analyzed above and the disastrous result of the referendum on electoral reform. Ontarians voted 63.1 percent in favour of keeping the present first past the post electoral system. Only 36.9 percent voted for change. In fact, the proposal carried in only 5 of the 107 ridings - all in the core of Toronto. It is interesting to note that of these 5, four are held by the NDP. Had the NDP, one must ask, made this too a central aspect of their campaign (even to the extent of the Greens), rather than bury the issue as they have done so repeatedly in the past, might a different outcome have been possible? The NDP refused to take the opportunity to link electoral reform to working class economic and political interests. The disintegration of social justice networks added to the difficulties of campaigning. It is clear that the level of radical political organization, and ideological leadership, in Ontario is such now that even particular single-issue campaigns that have broad popular resonance can falter badly.

The second hard lesson is obvious, but cannot avoid restatement. With few organizational resources and small numbers, the socialist left is as marginal a force as it has been in more than 70 years in Ontario. The October 10<sup>th</sup> election results stated loudly that the class struggle at the level of electoral forces is nearly imperceptible and not particularly influential. This is a register of wider organizational capacities in workplaces, communities, cities. There is, instead, the electoral weakness and political realignment of the NDP; and the emergence of a contemporary Liberal-

Labour alliance taking the corporate form of “competitive unionism” and a defensive cross-class project of “One Ontario” province-building. This alliance may well spread from the auto and educational sectors into other unions, further pulling the entire ideological spectrum to the right and open embrace of neoliberalism. Such political pressures and organizational imperatives have already dramatically impacted the policy stances of the NGO and non-profit sectors.

The socialist left, however, remains largely blinded from observing the need for its own realignment and reformation. Some still are caught in the prison of the debates of 1917; others are, embarrassingly, still animated more by directives from London or Havana; some still believe against all evidence that social democracy and “entryism” as an alternative to capitalism. Many, particular younger activists, remain animated by the “politics of chaos” and the organizational spontaneity of the anti-globalization movement, failing to notice that there is no longer a movement and rather than chaos there is the steady rhythms of neoliberalism. Others agree on the need for the left to move on, but for some 40 years now always conclude that the timing is not quite right. This is the impasse that the neoliberals and the new union corporatists take much comfort in.

Still, it is possible to suggest, even with minimal imagination, that unified and coordinated efforts of socialists could have a real and meaningful impact on struggles against poverty, protecting and expanding public services, building an immigrants’ rights movement, and re-establishing union capacities to struggle in workplaces and sectorally. There is a pressing need to establish a socialist counter-pole in educational and cultural work as well. There is potential to advance any number of these struggles in confronting the McGuinty regime over the next years. The incredible complacency of the Liberals heading into 2008, in the midst of credit and energy crises and a looming recession, leaves wide openings to advance anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist positions. But without a development of new political capacities on the socialist left, however, the political horizon of the next Ontario election may well be even more limited than this one.

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**P.S.**

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