
The 1990 Ontario Election: Lessons for Canadians

by Jim Henderson, MPP

The truism that love and hate are close together in the human mind emerges clearly from the results of Ontario's September 1990 general election. The leaders we idealize quickly become objects of scorn and even hatred. Conversely politicians sometimes survive intense denigration to emerge victorious in a subsequent election. Rarely has any politician or any government moved from idolatry to scorn as quickly as David Peterson and Ontario's Liberal government in the election of September 1990. The "teflon premier" whose popularity was at 50 to 60 percent throughout most of his 5-year term became the politician everyone loved to hate during two largely uneventful summer months of 1990.

Political scientists, journalists, and citizens will have their favourite explanations for this remarkable demise of a seemingly invincible team. But simple explanations are unlikely to suffice. To borrow a term from 'depth psychology', the fall was 'multi-determined'. There were manifest, personal, and latent factors.

The manifest factors were taxes, the Patti Starr affair, and the timing of the election. There had been hefty rises in Ontario property taxes in the last 2 years. Queen's Park bumped the provincial sales tax to a record 8 percent (then promised to reduce it back to 7 percent during the campaign). These were important irritants to an electorate. But Ontario had the lowest personal income tax rate in Canada for middle income households with children, the second lowest personal income tax in Canada for seniors, and the third lowest for low income households. The elimination of OHIP premiums returned a billion dollars to individuals and families, and almost 2/3 of a million tax filers in Ontario saw their Ontario income tax reduced through the Ontario tax reduction program. Moreover Queen's Park returned about a billion every year to seniors through measures like the Seniors' Tax Grant and Property Tax Grant.

Ontario municipalities successfully blamed Queen's Park for property tax increases, citing insufficient education grants as the reason for municipal hikes. Queen's Park was putting \$5.5 billion a year into education (including the Teachers Superannuation Plan), and was

funding 57 percent of approved education costs. Perhaps Queen's Park should have worked harder to counter the municipal assertions of excessive provincial thrift!

The so-called Patti Starr affair was a factor also, although interest in that has predictably waned with the demise of the Peterson Government. The Starr affair had enormous symbolic importance. I always suspected that little would come to light that was not already endemic to politics, but that may be the heart of the issue. People are fed up with the shallowness and phoniness of public process and the government's relationship with Patti Starr became the vehicle of that distaste.

The 1990 election call was unpopular. Premier Peterson said he called it to forestall an election in 1991 that would be fought on the divisive issue of Quebec nationalism and the thorny issue of an impending economic downturn. Electors did not accept that explanation. They saw the election as political opportunism and punished Peterson and his government for doing it.

The second set of reasons may be inherent in the leadership style and philosophy of David Peterson. The Premier once told me that a government is like a football team. He meant the quarterback calls the plays and each player plays his position. I am not fond of that analogy because it does not seem to me to allow for the individual creativity, freedom, and growth that I think is important in the longer term if an organization is to be dynamic, creative, and self-sustaining. A tightly knit, leader-centered group that tolerates little deviation from a closely woven agenda thrives and wins in the short term but is not always a formula for long term success.

Mr. Peterson's political skills were well-tuned for notable short-term success. He had a tough, combative *modus-operandi* hidden beneath a genial and easy-going manner that made him a difficult target for political opponents. His political style would be aptly suited to a crisis – to decisive, far-reaching action in a time of immediate stress and challenge. After months of drift, Ontario may have needed that in 1985, but in 1990 the scenario had changed. David Peterson, aptly suited to crisis leadership, somehow seemed to lack the depth and wisdom necessary for sensitive and understanding management in a time when there were few dragons to be slain and few maidens to be rescued. David Peterson had the

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toughness, but may have seemed to lack the depth and range to go the distance in long-term leadership.

Everything I have said so far might account for the loss of a few seats - at most a demotion of the government to minority status, but not massive repudiation.. More pervasive discontent must have been at work. Maybe it is the physician in me that seeks to probe beneath the surface and attend to what is underlying.

The Peterson Government was the first to go to the polls after the collapse of the Meech Lake Constitutional talks; the first to go to the polls in the imminent prospect of the 7 percent federal sales tax, and the first government to seek a new mandate since the adverse affects of the free trade deal began to be felt in Ontario. It was also the first government to go to the polls in the wake of major national unrest over Canada's troubled relationship with its native peoples.

I suspect these factors, together with the general sense of irritation with a political process that too much attends to appearances, played an important part in the fall of the Peterson Government. Of course, shallowness and appearances are the stuff of politics, but there is good reason to look carefully at our political institutions. Unlike our American cousins who canvassed the global options very carefully before constructing their constitution, Canada simply inherited the British parliamentary system. When some feisty and outspoken politicians in early Canadian legislatures proved too outspoken for their respective leaders' wishes, we stiffened the requirements of party solidarity and demanded that our legislators mindlessly adhere to the policies and positions crafted by their leaders and party whips.

In my opinion, the vast majority of Canadians oppose the convention of party discipline which needs to be relaxed to allow elected members to more accurately represent the views of their constituents. Forced to choose between personal conscience, duty to constituents, and allegiance to party platform, Canadian legislators overwhelmingly choose party.

It does not need to be that way. Experience has shown that governments do not fall and legislatures do not become unworkable when elected members balance their responsibilities to parties and party whips with their responsibilities to constituents and to personal consciences. Relaxation of party discipline, revamping of the legislative committee system, and democratization of the procedures and rules of parliamentary process are much overdue if Canadian assemblies are to recapture the confidence and trust of their electors.

It seems regrettable to me, in at least two ways, that our electoral system requires that local candidates be punished if a leader's performance is to be rejected. First, voters should be free to express their preferences at the

local level as well as at the provincial or national level without having to compromise one preference for the other. American electors, for example, elect their representative in the Senate or the House of Representatives and vote separately for the President or Governor. That seems only reasonable. True, it makes life tough for a head of government of one political persuasion who faces a Senate or Congress of another, but history shows that government does not become unworkable when that happens. Dedicated and tough-minded legislators committed to their mandates make it work.

Second, it seems a loss to the people of Ontario and an unnecessary waste that some hard-working, compassionate, and excellent colleagues (and their trained and experienced staffs) were rejected on September 6 for reasons that had little to do with either their good personal records or fine performances in the Legislature. They did not deserve it, nor did voters mean to reject their record of service, though our political system requires that they do so if they wish to send a firm message to the leader.

Speaking personally I had not been close to David Peterson, although I respected his leadership and felt he was a good premier. I differed on certain issues and perhaps on some points of political philosophy as well. I expressed major doubts about the wisdom of the Meech Lake Accord, feeling it would balkanize our nation and fly in the face of our need for a strong central government. Many voters seemed to share my view, and knew as well of my reputation as an independently-minded MPP. Perhaps all that played a part in my survival on September 6, and I am grateful to my constituents for their loyalty.

I have introduced a bill to set in motion a re-examination of the relationship between leaders and candidates in our parliamentary systems. Why should voters not be able to cast a separate ballot to elect the leader of our province or nation, while still retaining their prerogative to select the personal representative of their choice to serve in the elected assembly?

History may judge the government of David Peterson more kindly than did the events of September 6. The budget was balanced for the first time in 20 years, and the debt was paid down for the first time in close to half a century. And no one has ruled out the possible return of David Peterson to the helm of the Ontario Liberal Party at its forthcoming leadership convention likely to occur in 1992.

Meanwhile there is work to do and there are important lessons to be learned from the Ontario Liberal collapse of 1990. Our legislative processes need reform. The previous government did not understand that need, or if they did they did not give it much priority. I hope this current Ontario Legislature can do a little better. ♦