
Continuity and Change in the Ontario Provincial Party System

by Robert J. Williams

Ontario has many faces; extremes of wealth and modernity co-exist with poverty and primitive conditions. SkyDome and tar-paper shacks, cellular telephones and buckets for toilets, Old Order Mennonites and drug addicts, financial tycoons and fur trappers are all found in Ontario. Its economic system boasts extensive resource-based, agricultural, industrial, commercial, communications and service sectors while the society is, in turn, marked by geographic and ethnic heterogeneity. Ontario, at least in the eyes of the metropolitan media, has become a sophisticated and cosmopolitan community with all the attributes (both positive and negative) of modern society. Yet Ontario is also a society in which many pressures to "modernize" in such areas as Sunday shopping and the sale of liquor have been vehemently resisted. Strains between tradition and innovation are part of what makes Ontario politics unique in Canada. Despite the pace and extent of change, especially since 1945, the province was governed for more than forty years by one party, the Progressive Conservatives. The provincial government then changed hands twice in a little over five years, the second time giving a majority of seats to a party which had never governed the province before. To suggest that provincial party politics in Ontario is in a state of flux may be the political understatement of the 1990s! This article examines some of the major features of Ontario provincial party politics in the 1990s.

A former senior Ontario public servant has written that: "The diversity of Ontario, as a microcosm of Canada, ...means that the decision-making process in the provincial government normally involves a constant search for balance and compromise among competing interests. These approximate many of the trade-offs federal governments are forced to make."¹

Such impressions (while quite justified) prevent a clear view of Ontario's distinctive political situation. The historian S.F. Wise has observed that most Ontarians "do not perceive the province to be merely a region, but rather a kind of provincial equivalent of Canada as a

whole. Ontario politics, from this point of view, are simply another kind of national politics".²

Ontario has many of the political attributes and attitudes of a region, yet, as just noted, its people have seldom considered it to be one. For instance, Ontario's political history is almost unknown to the majority of its own residents, even though that history is rich, colourful and profoundly important to Ontario's contemporary political agenda (and perhaps Canada's).

Most observers of Ontario have tried to distill its political culture down to a list of essential characteristics or a succinct phrase. Rand Dyck, for example, suggested that certain values and attitudes such as "elitism, ascription, hierarchy, continuity, stability and social order ... are particularly applicable to this province. These can be summed up in the term 'conservatism'".³ Graham White's research on the Legislature

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demonstrated an "unwillingness to challenge accepted ways of doing things" which is, he suggested, "conditioned by the moderate, conservative traditionalism of Ontario's political culture."⁴ White believes, however, that this conservatism "tends to be leavened with a persistent concern with progress and reform" and that "liberal values of individualism, liberty, and a restricted role for the state remain of great importance in the province's political culture."⁵ Others suggest that the Ontario political culture is an unique blend of these two separate threads: John Wilson called Ontario a "progressive conservative" or "red tory" province and Terry Morley argued that Ontario was essentially dominated by "liberal-colonial" values.⁶

Other analyses consider the political culture in terms of a distinctive style of political life instead of values *per se*. Prosperity and economic stability after 1945 contributed to the generally moderate tone of Ontario political discourse and to the relative ideological moderation of all three major parties. In another instance, a connection was drawn between the behaviour of former Premier William Davis with the larger political culture. Indeed, the operating style of the long-dominant PCs was often equated with the entire political culture: "the rules of the political game as practised by the Conservative Party for forty-two years were ... change cautiously, seek consensus and blunt conflict ..."⁷

The unexpected changes of government in 1985 and (especially) 1990 prompts some rethinking about these commentaries and images. Ontarians had earned a reputation for political moderation, if not immobility, because of the long absence of any turnover in government. For many people, stability was directly related to the three-way party competition in which one party could successfully play its two opponents off against each other. For the PCs, this was assisted by regular leadership renewal, a well-managed and patronage-fuelled party machine and pragmatic approaches to governing. The reality of three-way competition in Ontario's regionalized party system, combined with increasing volatility in the electorate as a result of decreased prosperity, less effective government and cynicism about the motives of elected officials, appears to be continuing vulnerability. What changed?

The roots of the Ontario political culture are deep and some patterns of political behaviour very firmly developed, but many indicators now point to changes to the society which will make the discerning of a stable Ontario identity even more difficult. After all, there were long-term impediments to a cohesive political culture: Ontario "is characterized by great internal diversity in geography, economy, ethnicity, and religion. At the same time, its residents are mostly concentrated in urban areas

in the southern half of the province and exposed through an integrated communications network to the secular, technocratic culture that is common to all of northeastern North America."⁸

While the protracted and divisive debate over the merits of allowing retail trade on Sundays is a tangible sign of genuine cleavages in the Ontario value system, Ontario's economy and society are too complex to permit a polarization into two clearly defined political camps and provide the basis for a permanent three-party system that differs from other Canadian provinces, where two-party systems have tended to prevail.

Ontario may be on the brink of a new political era. This is not as much of a cliché as it might sound for Ontario political history has not witnessed much in the way of dramatic changes this century.

Traditional Themes of the Ontario Party System

Congruence At first glance, the provincial party system in Ontario appears to be *congruent* with the federal party system. Since the mid-1940s, there has been a persistent three-party configuration involving the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and CCF/NDP. Before the 1990 provincial election, Ontario was the only province to mirror the national party system in its provincial political life.⁹

The Canadian national party system has never been a large-scale version of the provincial party system in Ontario. Nor should the provincial party system have been understood as simply a miniature version of the national party system. There were, indeed, many parallels in the dynamics of the two systems, the most obvious of which is the fact that one party dominated government after 1945 primarily because the opposition to it was split between its competitors. In practice, however, the two party systems were distinctive and the provincial NDP victory in 1990 merely confirms that the impression of congruence is false.

Stability A second feature of Ontario politics has been an apparent long-term *stability*, especially in the provincial arena. First, despite occasional fluctuations, the parties have tended to be fairly persistent in the level of voter support they have achieved. As Peter McCormick has noted: "the CCF/NDP has spent the entire post-war period oscillating within the 15-30 percent zone, never rising above 30 percent and never falling below 15 percent for even a single election. No other provincial party system has anything comparable."¹⁰

The NDP broke the 30 percent barrier in 1990, but still only gained a plurality of the vote. Moreover, the long-term competitiveness of the three parties and the

fairly solid bases of support they continue to enjoy, give little indication that any one of them will collapse in the near future. This is a stable three party system and should continue to be one.

Ontario has experienced long periods of one-party dominance. In the Nineteenth Century, the Liberals governed continuously from 1871 to 1905 and in the Twentieth Century the Progressive Conservatives established a modern day record for political longevity in Canada. The recent dominance of the PCs does not paint the whole picture of political life in Ontario because although the Tories exercised a monopoly over governmental office only in the elections of 1951, 1955, and 1963 did they even come close to capturing one half of the popular vote. The growing volatility of the electors probably means one-party dominance is a thing of the past, although governments determined by pluralities continue to be a stable element of Ontario provincial politics.

Convergence An important theme in party politics in Ontario has been *convergence*: as Graham White put it simply: "...Ontario is not politically polarized".¹¹ Pragmatism rather than ideology served as the basis for party support and party organizations have been geared to capitalize on this condition. In their recent years in office, "both the Liberals and the Conservatives have been non-doctrinaire, brokerage parties, harbouring a broad spectrum of political beliefs".¹² This style contrasts with other provincial party configurations such as Saskatchewan and British Columbia where the dominant theme is divergence between two major parties.

This style has been pervasive, coming from the top down. Politically successful Ontario premiers have generally been perceived as moderates, and as cautious reformers; as leaders of a government, "Ontario premiers are (and are expected to be) managers more than leaders. Perhaps because of its traditional prosperity, Ontario has preferred premiers who were solid, competent managers rather than visionary leaders with clearly set out programmatic goals."¹³ One commentator has argued that as far as William Davis (Premier 1971-1985) was concerned, "political success lay in keeping to the moderate middle ground of the Ontario political spectrum where he believed most citizens were, and in remaining sensitive to the views of the public and thus politically relevant to them as well."¹⁴

Brokerage or consensus politics is the norm: "the three major Ontario parties are all attempting to crowd the centre of the political spectrum, because they know that is the road to political power."¹⁵ The Tories in the early 1980s were described as "a patchwork coalition of right-wing Conservatives, moderate Tories of the Davis

ilk, and many who were really Liberals but gravitated to the party in power"¹⁶; one insider asserts that this result was quite deliberately cultivated.¹⁷ During the PC dynasty, the Liberal party often found it difficult to stake out an alternative stance and developed a reactive mentality, apparently taking whatever position had not been espoused by the government. Its initial success in 1985 is widely understood to be the result of its capacity to take over the "vacated centre" of the political spectrum which had been abandoned by the Tories under Frank Miller.

Governing parties since 1945 have successfully isolated the opposition parties to the margins of the political spectrum by avoiding ideological labels altogether. Both William Davis and David Peterson have been called "fundamentally pragmatic politicians" and both "claimed that attempts to classify them on the political spectrum were fruitless, because they would respond to practical needs as they arose." The NDP, for its part, "has clearly been on the left in its emphasis on social issues" as well as certain economic issues, although it "aims for a 'pragmatic radicalism'".¹⁸ Over the years, the NDP responded "to changed external circumstances" with a less doctrinaire platform but frequently found its membership divided over various radical and moderate strategies and policies.

Thus, Rand Dyck concludes: "it could be said that all three Ontario parties have a progressive and a conservative element, or that all three try to operate within a fairly narrow progressive conservative ideological range."¹⁹ Convergence is still a vital part of Ontario party politics.

Competitiveness The notion of convergence obscures the fact that Ontario voters do make choices and are disposed to spread their support unevenly among the three major parties. In aggregate terms, as Peter McCormick noted, "Ontario elections have always been competitive and increasingly so in recent decades."²⁰ Minority governments were elected in 1975, 1977 and 1985 and each party's share of the popular vote has fluctuated fifteen percentage points (twenty for the PCs) from 1981. For the major parties, individual performances have varied wildly. In 1987, 52 Liberal candidates won majorities, and no Liberal even finished third, although 28 had done so in 1981. The extent of the collapse of the Progressive Conservatives in the Liberal and NDP sweeps is stark: in 1981, nearly 90% of the party's candidates finished first or second, but in 1987 15 PC candidates received less than 10% of the popular vote and in 1990 nearly two-thirds of the party's candidates (84) finished third (and another 9 fourth, mostly behind candidates of the Confederation of Regions Party). In 1987, New Democratic candidates clustered at the

extremes: the party won more seats than the PCs (19-16) but also had more third place finishes (67-61). Bob Rae's majority victory was cemented by the unpredictable: NDP candidates leapfrogged from third place to first in more than two dozen constituencies. Moreso than in recent memory, MPPs were elected with narrow margins, including 9 with a plurality of less than 200 votes. In many ways, competitiveness continues to be the theme in Ontario provincial politics.

Regionalism It should not be a surprise to find that, because of its size, Ontario itself is composed of social, economic and political regions. R.H. MacDermid has demonstrated, using data drawn from national election studies, that where an individual lives in Ontario is not unimportant in predicting his or her attitudes on a number of important social and economic issues.²¹ Viv Nelles draws a simple distinction between two Ontarios: the metropolitan regions and the rest of the province. Of significance to his analysis is the evidence that the outlying regions are less economically and socially diverse and that they are growing less rapidly. The challenge for political success is to bridge these two divergent communities. Very few parties have done so consistently.

In other words, Ontario has historically had a highly regionalized party system. The electoral strength of the three parties has traditionally been significantly different in various corners of the province in both the federal and provincial arenas, even though the three parties each formed governments with large majorities between 1981 and 1990 which, of course, confounds generalizations about regional support. The provincial PCs, for example, enjoyed a strong urban core of voter support throughout this century (although it disappeared in 1987) and combined this with effective links to the rural community during its years of dominance. Obviously, the extent of the party's losses were so severe in 1987 that nothing resembling a regional stronghold remained. In the slight recovery of 1990, the PCs made gains in the Metro area and in Western Ontario at the expense of the Liberals but remained weak in the Golden Horseshoe and Northern Ontario where only the party leader, Mike Harris, was elected. The Liberal Party was unable to achieve consistent support outside of its rural southwestern base until 1985 but actually retained only three seats in that region in 1990 while capturing five seats in the Ottawa area and another eighteen in Metro Toronto and the Golden Horseshoe. The NDP has consistently found most success in union-dominated constituencies and some urban centres where its opposition used to be the PCs, for the most part. The NDP's 1990 majority rested on that foundation plus a breakthrough in Western Ontario constituencies where

it had several second place finishes in 1987 and in such others as Oxford, Lambton and Middlesex where in 1987 support had been less than 20% of the popular vote.

Provincial aggregate figures, despite the volatility which seems to be taking over the Ontario electorate, mask an element of regionalism. Ontario is not an electorally homogeneous political system, but its political complexion is a combination of different two-party contests (and occasional three-party races) which occur in various parts of the province. Should the wide swings in electoral support dampen down in the next couple of elections, regional patterns will, no doubt, re-emerge in a more overt fashion.

The Distinctiveness of Federal and Provincial Politics

Federal and provincial parties have tended to keep their distance from one another in Ontario. For example, the PC party office in Toronto serves the provincial party alone (although there is a regional office of the federal party), while the Liberals have actually operated two parallel structures in Toronto since 1976, one for the federal party – the Liberal Party of Canada (Ontario) – and the other for the provincial party – the Ontario Liberal Party. The NDP's integrated federal-provincial party structure, which serves both federal and provincial causes without prejudice, is an anomaly in Ontario. In practice, however, the provincial field has been a more attractive and successful target and the party's provincial office has devoted most of its resources to that cause except during federal elections, when it operates as part of the national campaign apparatus. These practices demonstrate that two of the Ontario parties have chosen to develop overt signs of independence between their federal and provincial organizations. As Wearing has suggested, a close relationship between federal and provincial parties may not necessarily be an advantage when it comes to attracting voters who are disaffected by one level of government or the other.²² Nothing on the political horizon suggests that Ontario parties are anxious to change their organizational arrangements.

The experiences of party candidates reinforce this distinctiveness. For one thing, Ontario provincial legislators – moreso than legislators in the smaller provinces – normally consider spending their full career at Queen's Park and do not see it as a "farm team" for the House of Commons. In other words, members of the Ontario Legislature do not frequently move to federal politics. Surveys of major party candidates in the federal election of 1974 and the provincial election of 1975 demonstrated that there is very little movement between the two electoral arenas. A more recent review of the successful candidates in the 1990 provincial and 1988

federal elections shows only one former MP at Queen's Park (NDP Premier Bob Rae) and three former MPPs in Ottawa (Liberals Don Boudria and Sheila Copps and New Democrat Iain Angus). A former provincial NDP leader (Michael Cassidy) sat in the 33rd Parliament and another former NDP MPP, Mike Breough, replaced Ed Broadbent when he retired from federal politics. Considering the number of seats at stake in Ontario in the two electoral arenas, the proportion of candidates who have been nominated to run at both levels is actually quite small. A comprehensive analysis of MPs concluded that "provincial legislative experience has been even rarer among MPs of central Canada than it has been among MPs elected from the regional peripheries."²³ Indeed, only 3.3 per cent of Ontario MPs elected between 1958 and 1984 had served in the Ontario legislature. There is a possibility that defeated parliamentarians who cannot shake the grip of political life may end up in the other arena, but the uncertainty of modern campaigns will probably continue to discourage most winners to risk all in a bid to switch fields.

There has been considerable debate over whether Ontario voters distinguish between federal and provincial issues when casting their ballot, but it appears that many party activists and the party organizations themselves base their actions upon a recognition of the independence of the two areas and continue to sustain the separateness of federal and provincial politics in Ontario.

The 1990s have already challenged Ontario socially, economically and politically. The party system has also been caught between innovation and tradition: the surprise is that, upon close examination, the latter is more dominant than the former.

One explanation may be that the Liberals and New Democrats brought change to the Ontario political scene but not to the dynamics of the party system itself. In the 1990 election the New Democrats were able to achieve what its competitors had both taken for granted: majority government built upon an electoral plurality. That was a neat trick, to be sure, but repeating it will be an even greater challenge.



Notes

1. Donald W. Stevenson, "Ontario and Confederation: A Reassessment" in Ronald L. Watts and Douglas M. Brown, eds., *Canada: The State of the Federation 1989* (Kingston: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1989), p. 60.
2. S.F. Wise, "Ontario's Political Culture", in Donald C. MacDonald, ed., *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, 3rd edition (Toronto: Nelson, 1985), p. 161.
3. Rand Dyck, *Provincial Politics in Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1986), p. 269. It should be noted, in passing, that Dyck suggests that these are "values that are often associated with the whole country".
4. Graham White, *The Ontario Legislature: A Political Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. John Wilson "The Red Tory Province: Reflections on the Character of the Ontario Political Culture", in MacDonald, *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, 2nd edition (Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980) and J.T. Morley, *Secular Socialists: The CCF/NDP in Ontario, A Biography* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984), p. 25.
7. H.V. Nelles, "'Red Tied': Fin de Siecle Politics in Ontario" in Michael S. Whittington and Glen Williams, eds., *Canadian Politics in the 1990s*, 3rd edition (Scarborough: Nelson, 1990), p. 83.
8. Robert Drummond, "Is There an Ontario Identity?" in Eli Mandel and David Taras, eds., *A Passion for Identity: Introduction to Canadian Studies* (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), p. 323.
9. Robert J. Williams, "Ontario's Party Systems: Federal and Provincial" in the 5th Edition and "Ontario's Party Systems: Under New Management" in the 6th Edition of Hugh Thorburn, ed., *Party Politics in Canada* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1986 and 1991).
10. Peter McCormick, "Provincial Political Party Systems, 1945-1986" in Alain G. Gagnon and Brian Tanguay, eds., *Canadian Parties in Transition: Discourse, Organization and Representation* (Toronto: Nelson, 1989), p. 158. See also Robert Drummond, "Voting Behaviour: Dancing in the Dark on a Moving Floor", in MacDonald, 3rd edition, p. 223.
11. White, *The Ontario Legislature*, p. 70.
12. Graham White, "Governing from Queen's Park: The Ontario Premiership", in Leslie A. Pal and David Taras, eds., *Prime Ministers and Premiers: Political Leadership and Public Policy in Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1988), p. 170.
13. Graham White, "Governing from Queen's Park", p. 161.
14. Michael J. Prince, "The Bland Stops Here: Ontario Budgeting in the Davis Era, 1971-1985", in Allan Maslove, ed., *Budgeting in the Provinces: Leadership and the Premiers* (Toronto: Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1989), p. 94.
15. Joseph Wearing, "Ontario's Political Parties: The Ground Shifts", in Graham White, ed., *The Government and Politics of Ontario*, 4th edition (Toronto: Nelson, 1990), p. 234.
16. Rosemary Speirs, *Out of the Blue: The Fall of the Tory Dynasty in Ontario* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1986), p. 22.
17. Eddie Goodman, *Life of the Party: The Memoirs of Eddie Goodman* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1988), p. 240, writes that Bill Davis "was a pragmatist who did not approach government in a inflexible philosophy of the right or the left."
18. Speirs, pp. 234-235.
19. Dyck, pp. 315-316.
20. McCormick, p. 160.
21. R.H. MacDermid, "Regionalism in Ontario" in Alain-G. Gagnon and James P. Bickerton, eds., *Canadian Politics: An Introduction to the Discipline* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1990), p. 381.
22. Wearing, p. 295.
23. See Doreen Barrie and Roger Gibbins, "Parliamentary Careers in the Canadian Federal State", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XXII:1 (March, 1989), p. 144.