



# Clarion Call



“Government For the People”

Mad River Institute for Political Studies

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## ONTARIO ELECTION EDITION



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## Electoral reform must yet come

Now that the controversial MMP proposal for electoral change has been rejected by Ontario voters, it's time we addressed what's wrong with our present system that so annoys so many people.

1. Under “first-past-the-post” (FPTP), the winning party usually gets a bigger percentage of seats than the popular vote suggests they should, usually giving them a majority government when they “deserved” only a minority.

Given the rejection of MMP, we suggest a run-off system, where a candidate is only elected after receiving a majority of votes in their riding, not the plurality now accepted. If no one was to win a majority on election night, the top two candidates would run off against each other one week later. With many ridings already determined, people would have the chance to limit majorities, try to force minorities, or create majorities. In this way, at worst, voters would get their second choice as MPP.

2. Many believe our present party system, a result of FPTP, inherently discriminates against women and minorities in winning riding nominations, resulting in an unfair distribution of legislative seats.

We believe there are ways of making nominations fairer for everyone. First, the conduct of nomination meetings should be turned over to Elections Ontario so the voting process can be kept scrupulously fair. There are now no guarantees that those collecting and



counting the votes are neutral. As it is, some parties do not release the final voting numbers, so candidates and their followers may never know the margins of victory and defeat. This leads to the suspicion that local association or central party favourites seem to win more often.

Dates for selection should be the same for all parties, so that riding associations cannot manipulate schedules to assist or deter possible candidates. It has been known for dates to be moved up to keep some people out, or delayed to make sure a specific person can enter the race.

Nomination campaign spending should be kept to a minimum, and overseen by Elections Ontario. There is little doubt that some nominees outspend their peers by thousands of dollars. It has been conjectured that while women may be able to afford as much as men, they are less willing to impoverish their families and friends, and so they don't run for office. As well, accusations are routinely made that candidates illegally buy memberships for others to get out more votes in their favour. Oversight could help make this impossible.

3. While MPPs are supposed to represent everyone in their ridings, the truth is sometimes otherwise. Because some areas/ridings tend to be strongholds of one party, many voters there often feel they are perpetually without "real" representation.

Election campaign spending limits (at least in ridings) should be seriously reduced from the present 96¢ a voter. Since parties with the incumbent, especially someone long-term and/or in the government, have an easier time raising funds, most campaigns are quite unfair. If the limits were substantially reduced to, say, 50¢ per voter, it would give many more candidates an honest chance to win, without their opponents being able to just "buy" the election..

Given that officeholders also have a name recognition advantage, we suggest they be

encouraged to voluntarily leave office sooner. One way would be to pay MPP RRSP benefits in a fashion that causes them to peter out over time. Then, perhaps after ten years of incumbency, RRSP contributions would end. This would be incentive for all but the most dedicated MPPs to leave office sooner than later.

Even if the majority of voters rejected MMP, it is clear a large minority of people are not happy with our present electoral system. For this reason alone, change is necessary. However, our present system is salvageable if two things happen: our sitting politicians must be willing to give up some of their own advantages; and, they must open the conversation on reform to all citizens.

## Ontario's "Natural"

A lot of people seem surprised by the substantial Liberal victory in this most recent provincial election. They shouldn't be. It is quite likely the Liberals are now the "natural governing party" of Ontario.

From the Second World War until the mid-1980s, that title lay with the Progressive Conservatives, who dominated Ontario politics with 42 years straight as the government. Then, in 1985, a combination of misplaced ideology and predictable arrogance led to their defeat.

Mitchell Hepburn was Liberal premier of Ontario during the Great Depression, at a time when society was changing and he was not. An individualist with near-authoritarian tendencies, Hepburn so devastated his own party that the Conservatives of the time were able to come to dominate the ideological spectrum from centre-right to centre-left. It was a control they were able to maintain, for the most part, for four decades.

Then came the leadership of Frank Miller in 1985. It wasn't Miller personally, but the fact he represented the move of the PCs out of the centre of the ideological spectrum to a more

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## OUR VIEW

### Bad Attitudes

Regardless of the winners and losers, the tone of this provincial election must be concerning to all Ontarians. The campaign, by most parties, their leaders and some candidates, was personally abusive and negative. It is something about which all those concerned should be embarrassed.



Dalton McGuinty, Liberal leader, remarked on the elitist nature of his primary opponent. He suggested he represents the vindictive anti-government nature of former premier Mike Harris's

regime. Howard Hampton and John Tory, of the NDP and PCs respectively, all but called McGuinty a liar, constantly harping on his "string of broken promises". The two parties' television commercials did the same. Some of the Liberal's TV spots were the same, others more suggestive but still remarking negatively on Conservative policies.

But commenting on the policies of the parties is the point of an election. It is supposed to be a discussion of platforms and beliefs. Unfortunately, in recent years, too many campaigns have become little more than character assassinations, contests of duelling advertising machines which use dubious personality flaws and exaggerated emotional heart-string tugs to slag the party leaders. And it's not necessary.

It is all a matter of tone. Why were the

'broken promises' McGuinty's, not Liberal ones? Why was Tory the second coming of Harris, not the Conservatives simply a continuation of what they were? The answer is that too many political strategists think negative advertising and the unfavourable portrayal of party leaders is more effective than the discussion of ideas ... because so few parties have ideas worth examining.



Look at what we were presented by the three main parties for this election. The Liberals promised a few substantive measures, like a property tax rebate for seniors. Yet, they also offered fluff like a February holiday. Mostly, they defended their record and offered more of the same. The PCs, though controversial, promised a warmed-over platform of public funding for private schools, private health clinics, private alcohol sales, and new nuclear reactors. The NDP went back even further, stretching back to the 1980s for some of their commitments, like protection for laid-off workers. Most all have been offered before, by one party or another, at one time or another. And so, when your ideas are weak and old, you fall back to personal attacks and innuendo.



On behalf of their parties, Hampton, McGuinty, and especially Tory (given he said he would not indulge in personal attack politics) should apologize to Ontario's voters. As the leaders and those who approve of the strategies

and tactics of elections, they denied us a real debate on platforms and the opportunity to properly assess which politicians we should entrust with our province until the next election. For a democracy to prosper, the childish politics of the negative must end.

# Our Philosophy

As its basic principles, the Mad River Institute for Political Studies, its directors, officers, and members pledge that it, and they, will work to:

1. promote the “public good” through the strengthening of the public nature of government
2. have public servants recognize their inherent responsibilities to citizens
3. create more equity in politics through the expansion of democratic measures
4. have government recognize its inherent responsibility to act directly to help those citizens who need assistance
5. have public servants adopt higher standards of conduct for themselves and all society
6. have public servants recognize their inherent responsibilities in the expenditure of tax dollars while still delivering needed public services
7. have public servants consider more innovative and original ideas to deal with problems
8. assist the public in better understanding the political process and their place in it, as well as the consequences of their political decisions.

It is our belief that people must begin to take greater charge of their own political affairs, and demand more responsibility and accountability from politicians and government for their actions. That is our *raison d’être*. We want to act as an observer, critic, and teacher of government and politics, and try to promote political activity amongst the public by improving the efficacy, accountability, and responsibility of government.



For us, we are in our early days. It is most important we gain members, both for the legitimacy of our cause and for our finances. If you’re not already a member and you think the Institute is on the right track, then please consider joining us. Our basic membership is just \$20.

If you’re already a member, please consider a small donation to help offset the costs of ongoing operations, such as advocating our goals, our educational programmes like **PEAR**, and our everyday expenses, which we keep as low as we can.

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reactionary social and economic view. It permitted the David Peterson-led Liberals to slip into the middle, and Ontarians rewarded them for it. But the Petersonians too quickly saw themselves as the new natural governing party, apparently now at the beginning of their own 40-year reign. It was far shorter. An overbearing nature, playing constitutional "footsies" with an unpopular federal government, and a casualness with raising taxes led to their quick, and shocking, downfall.

However, Ontarians showed an unwillingness to return to the PCs, as one might have expected. Now led by the closed-minded Mike Harris, he had, if anything, moved the party further to the right-wing. On the other hand, the Bob Rae NDP came across as quite centrist, having supported the Liberals from 1985-1987 during the most responsible period of the post-Tory dynasty. Voters wanted to punish Peterson, but retain moderation.

They didn't get what they expected. Rae's government was caught in the first depression since the 1930s and didn't have the experience to respond. They increased the deficit to spend their way out of the downswing, which emptied the treasury even faster than it was emptying on its own. Then, they cut some programmes, irritating their allies and stalling the economy, but keeping heavy debt. In 1995, Ontarians reacted by veering to the right, as the solution to what they saw as the error of their 'left-wing' dalliance.

The trip to the right was ultimately as painful, if better organized. Eight years of chopping public services, and vindictive 'pogroms' against anyone the government saw as an enemy, eventually saw the Conservatives cut to their base support, with a plurality of voters moving back to the centre to return the Liberals to power.

As things stand today, Dalton McGuinty, personally, will not go down as one of Ontario's great premiers. He broke too many promises and appeared too self-satisfied in his first term to make people like him much. That having

been said, circumstances delivered him a second huge majority government. Yes, the PC campaign of leader John Tory turned into a farce that shed most negative light on him, but even that doesn't really explain why voters fell back to the Liberals in such significant numbers.

The answer could be because, in 1987, the Liberals actually became the natural governing party of Ontario. That election saw the Tories so defeated, so utterly devastated, it is not unreasonable to see this as a realigning election which changed the default

political party preference from the PCs to the Liberals. It was



a huge victory for centrist views over right-wing ones, as well as one that demonstrated the party of the centre will usually be the one supported by people. However, this was hidden because the Liberals failed to win the next three elections. Regardless, evidence suggests the Liberals are now the fallback position for a plurality of voters, and the second choice for almost all voters.

The PCs held the centre of the political spectrum from the mid-1940s to the mid-80s. They also held power. The Liberals were able to take that ideological position in 1985, as they took power. Unusual circumstances then saw Ontario voters go left and right, against their own political history. In 2003, they reverted to form. As long as the Liberals hold the centre, they should hold power most of the time. If they make the mistake the Tories made in 1985 and move away from moderation, another party could well move into to become the natural governing party of Ontario. For now, it's theirs.

Byron Montgomery  
President