

# **“Bland Works”: The Traditions of Ontario Politics in the Run Up to the 2011 Election**

A paper prepared for the annual meetings of the Canadian Political Science Association  
University of Alberta  
June 2012

Jonathan Malloy  
Dept. of Political Science  
Carleton University  
[jonathan\\_malloy@carleton.ca](mailto:jonathan_malloy@carleton.ca)

The most memorable phrase in Ontario politics was contributed by Premier Bill Davis in 1980. In a legislative debate, responding to opposition accusations of his “bland” leadership, he replied: “I am going to have a new slogan, “Bland works.” The phrase “bland works” has become Davis’s epitaph and, at the time, embodied the longstanding conventional wisdom of Ontario politics and political culture – that it rewarded pragmatism and caution over boldness and ideology. The 2011 Ontario election saw a similar phrase by another premier – Dalton McGuinty. In a Liberal television ad, McGuinty faced the camera and said: “The polls tell us I’m not the most popular guy in the country. I accept that.” This self-deprecating statement encapsulated McGuinty’s pragmatic, anti-charismatic style of governing, much like that of Bill Davis.

Between these two statements though, lie thirty years of turbulence in Ontario politics. While Dalton McGuinty may rival Bill Davis for blandness, Ontario underwent considerable political, economic and social shifts in the recent past, with considerably more polarizing premiers and governing parties. How has this affected the underlying Ontario political culture and patterns of Ontario politics? Have they remained fundamentally the same, in a state of transition, or even transformed? Taking a broad view, this paper argues that Ontario politics has remained surprisingly stable despite the political upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s and the economic challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Examining recent Ontario political history, we will identify continuing themes that have prevailed despite the sometimes wild oscillations in governing parties and premiers. This sets the background for the more detailed study of the 2011 election.

### **Traditional Ontario Political Values: Loyal, Pragmatic, and Canadian**

This paper’s examination of Ontario politics encompasses a number of concepts including political culture, provincial identity, and “politics” broadly defined. While “political culture” has traditionally referred to the underlying values and norms that condition political behavior in a given society, it can be a shifting and somewhat amorphous concept, especially when approached from a qualitative point of view - relying on generalizations and assertions not easily testable. The boundaries between political culture, political identity and political behavior are often fuzzy, and political culture scholarship can emphasize strikingly different approaches. For some, political culture is influenced by early, formative events in a society that produce a subsequent congealment of values and norms that shape the attitudes of subsequent generations and newcomers. Others find this model too static, emphasizing instead the evolution of values and norms over time in response to new events and developments. And some take essentially a hybrid approach, noting formative and congealing events but also accepting their ability to evolve over time.

Still, the core idea of political culture is that a polity has distinctive and enduring values and norms that animate its politics and distinguish it from other societies, and scholars have generally agreed that Ontario has historically exhibited such distinctions (Wilson 1980; Noel 1997; Wilson 1997; Morton 1997; Wiseman 2007). For many years, this was tied to the remarkable durability of the Progressive Conservative party, in office continually from 1943 to 1985 under a succession of leaders - but even after the 1985 PC collapse, the standard model endured. Wilson argued in 1980, the year of “bland works”, that Ontario was the “Red Tory province” and truly embodied the oxymoronic Canadian

values of “progressive conservatism” (Wilson 1980). Seventeen years later, writing in 1997 at the height of Mike Harris’s “Common Sense Revolution”, Wilson observed that “it does appear to be the same old Ontario” (1997:71). In the same year, Noel maintained that the Ontario political culture continued to have “five operative norms”: the imperative pursuit of economic success; the assumption of pre-eminence in the Canadian federation; the requirement of managerial efficiency in government; the expectation of reciprocity in political relationships, and the balancing of interests (1997).

Overall, we can identify three overall values and principles of Ontario politics that consistently emerge in this literature - *loyalty*, *pragmatic “management”*, and *identification with Canada*. Each has clear connections to Ontario history and politics, and to varying extents set Ontario apart from other province. We will briefly describe each below. However, the key question is to what extent these values have endured after the upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s, and their relevance to Ontario politics today.

**Loyalty** is embodied in the provincial motto *Ut Incepit Fidelis Sic Permanet*, widely translated as: “Loyal she began, Loyal she remains”. This key value for the Ontario polity is linked to the early European settlement of Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution. The later War of 1812 further cemented the sense of Ontario as a loyal (i.e. British) society quite distinct from the United States. Ideas of elitism and establishment also survived the dashed 1837 Rebellion, and in the run-up to Confederation when Ontario emerged as the most populous and increasingly the most economically dominant province. Some have challenged this history, suggesting that Ontarians were not as loyal or imperialist as asserted, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was Ontario’s premier Oliver Mowat who was the most aggressive at challenging federal jurisdictional claims. Nevertheless, the sense of a fundamentally satisfied province, absent of restlessness, remained in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reinforced by Ontario’s booming economy, especially in manufacturing. The idea of a province that never rocked the boat is captured in Wilson’s 1980 list of Ontario political culture values – “ascriptive”, “elitist”, “hierarchical”, “stable”, “cautious” and “restrained” (214). Most interestingly, Ontarians displayed an unusual loyalty to one party for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sustaining an unbroken string of Progressive Conservative governments for 42 years under four major premiers from 1943-1985 – a record unparalleled in Canadian provincial politics (though scheduled to be broken in Alberta in 2013).

**Pragmatism** and “**management**” is another key value. For many years, Ontario politics was largely a question of managing its bountiful prosperity, meaning that provincial politics was characterized more by simply keeping the good times going and “managing prosperity”, rather than requiring any kind of shake-up or radical shift. Excepting perhaps Mitchell Hepburn, 20<sup>th</sup> century Ontario premiers were generally lacking in charisma or ideological fervor and displayed a high degree of predictability. Reluctant to upset a content and prosperous society, Ontario governments were comfortably intimate not only with business and traditional elites but increasingly with organized labour and other interests. The economic fortunes of the province, particularly in the post war years, allowed intimacy with all interested actors, as the rising tide lifted all boats in the growing provincial state. “Managerial efficiency” (Noel 1997) and “competent government” (Wilson 1980) became a key test for governments, embodied in yet another premier’s epitaph – “I’m a management man”. (John Robarts). This pragmatism was key for political leadership; Noel argues (1997) that “More than the people of any

other province, and perhaps more than any people anywhere, Ontarians tend to define political leadership in terms of managerial capability rather than other qualities such as personal charisma.” (60-1). This value of course is at the heart of Davis’s offhand phrase “bland works.”

A third principle is Ontario’s **identification with Canada** as a whole. While as noted, Ontario had been assertive in its claims of provincial jurisdiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, suggesting loyalty had its limits, twentieth-century Ontario had little if any sense of regional grievances and tended to defer, at least publicly, to the federal government in federal-provincial matters. Historically Ontario voter turnout was somewhat higher in federal elections than in provincial contests, something reversed in many other provinces (see Wiseman 189). As Wiseman argues (2007; see also Morton 1997, p 17), Ontario even lacked curiosity about itself; academic and popular historians focused on the national scene, not provincial experiences. As federal-provincial struggles became more conflictual, Ontario portrayed itself either as the honest disinterested broker, as seen in its hosting of the 1967 “Confederation of Tomorrow” conference, or was outright deferential to the federal government, illustrated in its alignment with Pierre Trudeau’s unilateral constitutional patriation in 1981 against eight opposing provinces, and its unrelenting enthusiasm for the 1987 Meech Lake Accord to the bitter end. In fiscal federalism, Ontario maintained its status as a “have” province even as economic power shifted to the West and the equalization formula was adjusted to deliberately exclude the province from equalization grants. Indeed, the province and nation seemed so closely linked that Wilson hypothesized in 1980 that “those values which have been assigned to the whole of English Canada...[may] belong in fact only to Ontario” (214).

These three principles – loyalty, pragmatic management, and identification with Canada – emerge regularly in the prevailing literature on 20<sup>th</sup> century Ontario politics and political culture. Wilson even argued in 1980 that “[i]n Ontario we don’t believe in change for the sake of change; we prefer order, stability and continuity. And as long as the Conservatives can provide that – with just a touch of reform when the times demand it – they can go on at Queen’s Park forever.” (225). But of course, the Conservatives did not, and the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by new political and economic developments and ideas that suggested Ontario politics was undergoing dramatic shifts beyond changes in governing parties. In 1985, Bill Davis was succeeded as premier by Frank Miller, but Miller scraped out a bare plurality of seats in the subsequent election and was soon defeated by David Peterson’s Liberals, supported by a formal accord with Bob Rae’s New Democrats. The fall of the Tory dynasty in 1985 was only the beginning of rapid change in Ontario politics; Peterson’s Liberal government was unexpectedly defeated in 1990 and succeeded by the even more unexpected election of an NDP majority government under Bob Rae. Surprise came again in 1995 with the election of Mike Harris’s Progressive Conservatives and their *Common Sense Revolution* platform. This volatility was accompanied by more ideological polarization, with sharper choices and greater confrontation both between parties and between government and societal interests, especially under the Rae and Harris governments.

Economically, Ontario saw the leveling off and gradual decline of much of its traditional manufacturing activity, with no share in the energy prosperity of other parts of the country, and began to draw more heavily on the federal purse and edge closer to “have-not” status. The interests of the

Ontario political economy were no longer at one with the nation (Nelles 1990). And socially, as the Ontario population continued to grow, Ontario began to feel the strains of urban sprawl, racial diversity, immigrant settlement and rural alienation. Common bonds were no longer as evident, and tensions could no longer be papered over by money as in earlier, more prosperous eras. The idea that something was different in Ontario began to take shape, embodied in the title of journalist John Ibbitson's 2001 book *Loyal No More*. Ontario governments became gradually more assertive in federal-provincial relations, launching a judicial challenge to the 1991 federal capping of transfer payments to the richer provinces as a prelude to further aggressive initiatives against the federal government and/or other provinces. Ontario generally became of more interest to previously nationally-focused observers; Wiseman observes a "swelling interest in things Ontarian" (190). In short, there was evidence that the above longstanding Ontario political values may have been in sharp decline at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Loyalty appeared to be replaced by volatility and mercurialism; pragmatism by ideology and confrontation; and Canadianness by a new self-interest.

At the same time, observers were careful not to jump to conclusions and discard the long-term understanding of Ontario. Two edited works of the late 1990s – White's *Government and Politics of Ontario (Fifth Edition)* and Noel's *Revolution at Queen's Park* – both capture the sense of uncertainty and a reluctance to make hasty conclusions. While Ontario politics itself had clearly become more volatile and confrontational, it was not clear whether or to what extent the underlying political culture and values were realigning. Morton noted "it may be that the old rules of Ontario politics have changed, and that further, wrenching changes lay ahead....But the habits and achievements of 130 years are not quickly set aside." (16, 17) Wilson (1997) wrote "It is rapidly becoming customary to insist that the character of Ontario's political life is in the midst of a profound change" (55) But (as quoted above), he concluded, "it does appear to be the same old Ontario" (71). In the remainder of this chapter, we extend this analysis to the current era of Dalton McGuinty and the 2011 election, and reflect on to what extent Ontario politics and political culture changed from its longstanding values of loyalty, pragmatism, and Canadianness – and if it did, what the new values might be.

### **The Peterson, Rae and Harris Governments**

Our starting point is 1985, the year of the Progressive Conservative collapse. While this was a considerable shock to Ontario politics and government, contemporary analyses suggested that it was still explainable within the existing model of the "Red Tory" province, and particularly the values of pragmatism and "competent" government. The cause appeared to be one of short-term political timing and miscalculations, rather than a shift in the electorate's values.

Bill Davis's 1984 decision to extend full funding to the final grades of Catholic secondary schools was a typically incremental progressive move for his government; yet it was unpopular with elements of the party base, and Davis's subsequent political retirement left the party divided over the issue at a time of transition. The selection of his successor Frank Miller, who was two years older than Davis and from the rural Muskoka era, appeared out of sync with urbanized Ontario and the traditional PC succession tradition. In contrast, Liberal leader David Peterson represented new blood – from London (urban but not too urban), young (41) and generally appearing upbeat and confident without evidence

of any particular ideological colour or excessive charisma. In the May 1985 general election, Miller's PCs won 52 seats and Peterson's 48. Both parties appealed for support from the NDP under Bob Rae, with 25 seats; eventually Peterson and Rae reached a written accord that provided two years of NDP support in return for specific policies including pay equity legislation and an end to extra billing by doctors beyond fees provided by public health care. The resulting 1985-87 government was one of the more progressive and active governments in Ontario history, but was not fundamentally different in tone or output from its PC predecessors, especially Davis's own minorities in the 1970s. In 1987 Peterson won a majority government and the activist pace slowed, signaling an apparent return to the more traditional Ontario way of pragmatic caution, with occasional outright inertia. In many ways, it appeared that Ontario had made a relatively easy transition between governing parties, with little disruption to its political character and policy outputs, much less changes in the underlying political culture.

The 1990 election of a majority New Democratic government was unexpected, but could still be explained within the existing framework. David Peterson called an early election in 1990, three years into his mandate, in part anticipating a coming economic slowdown. At first comfortably ahead in the polls, his party slid drastically and was replaced by a NDP majority government under Rae. No academic study was made of the 1990 election, and it will always remain a partial mystery. Nevertheless, commercial polls make clear that voters saw Peterson's Liberals as elitist and disconnected from "ordinary" Ontarians, and this was linked to Peterson's strong championing of the Meech Lake Accord, which had gone down to ignominious defeat in June just before the election call. This was an era of discontent in Canadian politics, with interminable constitutional reform debates and the deeply unpopular federal Conservative government under Brian Mulroney deterring support for the Ontario Progressive Conservatives. As the third party, the NDP appears to have been the beneficiary of discontented voters searching for any alternative to the Liberals and Conservatives. As noted, we lack academic studies of 1990 voter behavior, but evidence suggests the choice of the NDP was impetuous rather than an endorsement of a social democratic vision radically different from previous Ontario governments. As in 1985, explanations of poor political timing and short-term circumstances are at least plausible explanations for the strange turn of Ontario politics in 1990.

The Rae government itself appeared to conform to at least some underlying Ontario political values, especially pragmatism and centrist politics. While its first budget famously drove up a high deficit "to fight the recession," the Rae government quickly discarded its longtime promise of public auto insurance and became more fiscally cautious over time. Its most dramatic struggle involved a rejection of the party's own ideological values, as Rae's "social contract" reopened collective agreements and imposed unpaid furloughs on public sector workers. The Rae government has attracted a somewhat unfair reputation among the right as a fiscal disaster, but for the left it was "giving away a miracle", in the words of one contemporary book (Ehring and Roberts 1993). Considering its beginnings, it was a remarkably pragmatic government that over time tacked to the political centre (foreshadowing Rae's later change of political affiliations) – suggesting the conforming pressures of the enduring values of Ontario politics.

However, there were signs of disruption to the framework of loyalty, pragmatism and Canadianness. In addition to Ontarians' penchant for rapidly turning out governments, the period of postwar prosperity was ending, and Ontario became more assertive vis-à-vis the federal government. The early 1990s recession and the adjustment to free trade with the United States was particularly hard on the Ontario manufacturing sector, creating high unemployment and hitting regional cities that had depended on the branch plant economy particularly hard. While deficit budgets had been the norm in the 1970s and 1980s (the 1989-90 Peterson government was the first in many years to run a slight surplus, at a time of great economic prosperity and a Toronto real estate bubble), provincial finances became seriously in the red, moving from deficits of \$ 2-3 billion to over 10 (even after the Rae government began its program of restraint). As well, the Mulroney governments had proven – at least temporarily – that federal governments did not need Ontario to win elections, and Rae's decision to sue the federal government for capping its transfers to the wealthiest provinces demonstrated that Ontario was no longer a reliable ally for Ottawa. (On the other hand, Ontario was one of the few provinces that loyally voted in favour – just barely- for the doomed Charlottetown Accord in 1992.) In short, change was certainly evident in Ontario politics.

The third unexpected disruption in Ontario politics was the election in 1995 of the Progressive Conservatives under Mike Harris and the subsequent "Common Sense Revolution." While the ultimate doom of the Rae government was widely accepted, the Liberals under Lyn McLeod appeared comfortably ensconced in the polls and were expected to restore Ontario politics to the cautious centrism of the Davis/Peterson years. But Harris's Conservatives broke through the polls in the last two weeks of the Ontario election, winning a strong majority of seats, and immediately executed a stunningly rapid implementation of power (White and Cameron 1999) and immediate policy changes. The "Common Sense Revolution" entailed a tax cut, slashing of social assistance and postsecondary funding, and repeal of the more contentious NDP policies like employment equity and anti-scab legislation. The consequent backlash, strikes (including the first ever Ontario public service strike) and "Days of Action" city-wide protests were unprecedented in Ontario politics.

The question for scholars and observers was whether or not these rapid political developments signified a broader shift in the longstanding values of Ontario politics. As noted above, scholars in the late 1990s were hesitant to jump to conclusions. This caution to pronounce that the *political culture* had changed is not surprising, given that political culture by definition is long-term and evolves slowly over decades, not after an election or two. But even if the political culture had not entirely changed, it appeared to be evolving. The Harris government was the culmination of ten years of change and increasing turmoil, and Ontario politics certainly looked different from the era of "bland works". At times the Harris government took on a tone of restoration rather than radicalism, claiming the mantle of the old Progressive Conservative dynasty and suggesting their actions were only in response to the perceived imbalance of the Rae years. But their confrontational style was distinctly different than any Ontario government since perhaps Mitchell Hepburn's. Mike Harris himself is an interesting study in leadership. While associated with the more traditional right-wing of the party (he supported Frank Miller in 1985), Harris was seen more as an opportunist than a true ideologue for small government, and was a shambling, almost anti-charismatic figure. Yet he was clearly willing to confront not just the

traditional enemies of the right, like organized labour, but even more traditional PC allies with the 1997 shift to restructuring municipal institutions that widely upset rural and suburban areas. While less documented than the “Common Sense Revolution”, perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Harris government was its widespread amalgamation of cities and towns across the province, most notably Toronto and Ottawa, and simultaneous downloading and uploading of responsibilities between the province and municipalities – showing little loyalty or pragmatic incrementalism toward municipal interests. As well, foreshadowing a later federal Conservative government, the PC government showed a distinct lack of interest in parliamentary institutions as autonomous bodies apart from ratifiers of the electorate’s choices (Pond 2005).

Political upheaval was again accompanied by economic and intergovernmental shocks. While the Ontario economy began to recover amid the general prosperity of the late 1990s, it had begun to restructure itself into a greater dependence on the United States and international trade rather than its traditional model of dominating the Canadian economy, embodied in Thomas Courchene’s monograph *From Heartland to North American Region State* (1998). Whether or not this was a route to prosperity or a dangerous incursion of neo-liberalism, the Ontario economy was evolving and leaving behind the traditional patterns of lower-middle class prosperity through stable manufacturing jobs, a stable and prosperous agriculture sector, and a somewhat more fluid resource extraction economy in the rural and northern areas. Additionally, cuts in federal transfers by the Chretien government underlined further that Ontario was more and more on its own, and low-level sniping continued to grow between the federal and provincial governments.

### **The McGuinty Restoration?**

By the early 2000s, Ontario politics had gone through a decade and a half of radical shake-ups and appeared to have substantially transformed from the Davis years. But somewhat surprisingly, the balance appeared to restore itself. Following Mike Harris’s political retirement, the PCs selected Ernie Eves as their new leader. Despite being finance minister for the Common Sense Revolution, Eves was perceived as a Red Tory, again in the historic PC tradition, and prevailed over contenders like the more right-wing Jim Flaherty. But Eves proved erratic in office, switching to a right-wing platform in the 2003 provincial election and was soon dispatched by Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty.

McGuinty was a most unlikely leader. The obscure and unexpected winner of the 1996 Liberal leadership contest, he was defeated by Harris in the 1999 election but then succeeded in 2003, running primarily on a platform to restore stability to Ontario politics and especially labour relations. McGuinty’s style was earnest and pragmatic, not ideological or confrontational, and bore certain similarities to his Liberal predecessor David Peterson as well as the historic PC dynasty. The McGuinty government, with a mix of former Peterson hands along with new faces, took advantage of a new wave of economic prosperity to reach peaceful labour agreements and open up new spending for health care, education and other sectors. However, less widely remembered is that McGuinty took office under a large fiscal

deficit. (The Conservatives had restored Ontario to surplus budgets in 1999 but ran a sizable deficit in 2003<sup>1</sup> due to election promises and mediocre economic conditions).

The McGuinty government was clearly far less confrontational or dramatic than either the Rae or Harris governments, and his personal style further suggested a restoration of traditional Ontario blandness. The reassertion of Ontario political values of loyalty and pragmatism (leaving aside Canadianness) was perhaps even more evident in the 2007 provincial election, in which McGuinty faced new PC leader John Tory. Tory's platform offered limited contrast to the Liberals, largely pledging to continue its fiscal and economic policies, suggesting a calculation that the province had no appetite for more Harris-style disruption. Instead, the Conservatives tried to focus on McGuinty's credibility, and particularly his breaking of a 2003 no-taxes pledge by introducing "health care premiums" to fill the provincial coffers. In turn, the Liberals focused on a somewhat obscure Conservative promise to supply public funds to private faith-based schools (updating a 2003 Eves pledge to allow tax credits for private schooling, which was seen to favour the rich). Campaigning on maintaining the strength of the public school system and deftly sidestepping the question of separate Catholic schools, McGuinty and the Liberals managed a second majority win on the strength of their record and pledges for maintaining the strength of Ontario's public institutions. In short, the 2007 election largely revolved around the old question once again of managing Ontario's prosperity, between two relatively bland leaders who both sought to show their mastery of political incrementalism. As well, in a perhaps unfortunate measure of the new lack of passion or excitement in Ontario politics, 2007 set a record for the lowest voter turnout in an Ontario provincial election -only 52.8% compared to 56.9 in 2003.

In the McGuinty years, loyalty and pragmatism appeared alive and well in Ontario after the unusual events of the 1980s and 1990s. Ontario's relationship with Canada is a somewhat different story. The 2000s were generally good economic times for Ontario, but the shift had continued toward a more globalized economy, integrated more with the United States than the rest of Canada. They were also important in the declining relationship between the provincial and federal governments. While not necessarily reflected in public opinion, Ontario governing elites had certainly lost any sense that what was good for Canada was always good for Ontario. Perhaps most symbolically, the Ontario government created a think-tank at the University of Toronto (the Mowat Centre) devoted primarily to studying the status of Ontario within Confederation, with a clear mandate to assert provincial interests more loudly. On the other hand, it is less evident that Ontarians themselves still considered themselves antagonistic with the federal government. While voter turnout was generally on the decline everywhere in Canada, Ontarians still voted more in federal than Ontario elections. Ontarians also continued to have less of a provincial identity than the rest of Canada – in one 2005 survey, 58% of Ontarians said they thought Canadians identified first as Canadians and then as a province and 35% said equally to both, compared to 48% and 40% respectively for the rest of Canada excluding Quebec.<sup>2</sup> However, in the same survey

---

<sup>1</sup> Ontario's deficit for 2003-2004 (spanning the last six PC months and the beginning of the Liberal government) was 5.4 billion, after a surplus of 117 million the previous year. Due to the change in government and the possible inclination of the Liberals to shift spending to this year rather than the next wholly Liberal year, it is difficult to attribute the 2003-04 deficit entirely to either governing party.

<sup>2</sup> Strategic Counsel poll. The exact question was "Do Canadians see themselves as Canadians, as a province, or equally as a Canadian and a province?"

Ontarians were the most likely to feel there was a fiscal imbalance between Ottawa and the provinces (in the federal government's favour). This suggests that while Ontarians continued to identify strongly with Canada as a whole, there was more attention to the details of the relationship and a sense that Ontario's interests were not necessarily well-served. Ontario has also continued the pattern of alternating parties at the provincial and federal level, suggesting both were acceptable at various times.

### **The Run up to 2011**

As Ontario moved toward the 2011 election, each of the parties appeared to conform to the traditional model. The new PC leader, Tim Hudak, won the leadership in 2009 over a perceived moderate, Christine Elliott, and the rural populist Randy Hillier, positioning himself as mildly to the right and in the centre of the PC party. Hudak had been elected in the 1995 Tory breakthrough and briefly served in the last months of the Mike Harris cabinet. But he did not display real ideological fervor, nor present a distinctly contrasting vision for Ontario in the way of his predecessor's *Common Sense Revolution*. Rather, in the runup to the 2011 election Hudak placed focus on the Liberal management scandals and problems such as the e-Health debacle, and referring to McGuinty as the "tax man" for the Liberal premium hikes, the harmonized GST, and an ill-fated 2010 eco tax. Less clear was Hudak's own revenue and spending plans, including whether he would eliminate the above taxes; for example, after some hesitation Hudak endorsed McGuinty's plans for all-day kindergarten, possibly cultivating support but showing increasingly little substantive difference between his party and the Liberals. Hudak's own style was widely derided as wooden and lacking personal connections with voters, positioning him similar to Dalton McGuinty. Overall, the PC strategy appeared to focus on the traditional Ontario issue of competent governance, calculating that voters had tired of Liberal missteps but did not necessarily yearn for radical policy changes.

NDP leader Andrea Horwath also put forward a limited vision of alternative governance. Elected leader in 2009, Horwath appeared to follow the lead of federal leader Jack Layton in downplaying social democratic rhetoric in favour of a bland appeal to "ordinary Ontarians" and their everyday lives. Horwath opposed the HST and campaigned for its removal from utility bills, a policy that may not have been sound social democratic policy but echoed Layton's focus on consumer issues like credit card rates. The NDP platform was more distinct from the Liberals than was the case for the Conservatives, but offered relatively predictable suggestions, again often framed as consumer issues such as a freeze on transit fares. As a female leader, Horwath received perhaps unsurprising and stereotypical media coverage as a person of warmth and friendliness, downplaying any sense of aggressive change or ideological challenge.

In short, both opposition leaders and their parties offered limited distinct choices to voters. Instead, they (especially the PCs) chose to again fight on the issue of managing Ontario, especially because of the McGuinty government's various management scandals. Similarly, PC accusations of McGuinty as "tax man" focused less on the increased taxes themselves and more on problems with the process of their adoption and subsequent administration. The McGuinty Liberals responded by emphasizing their governance record, especially as they moved into late summer and fall when the election approached. McGuinty admitted to "not being the most popular guy" even as he listed his

government's achievements,; the party's advertising emphasized health and education spending, implying a sea change from the cutbacks and instability of the 1990s. In doing so, they played into the longstanding values of loyalty and pragmatism in Ontario politics.

The importance of these enduring values is best understood by noting the increasing disconnect between all of the above parties in the run up to the 2011 election, and the worsening fiscal and economic condition of Ontario. Having become a have-not province receiving equalization grants, the Ontario economy went into recession in 2008-9 at the time of the global economic crisis, and teetered on the edge of recession for much of 2011. The provincial deficit grew significantly over the second Liberal term, with further increases forecast, while economic data and outlooks for the province were mixed at best. But despite considerable evidence of economic decline in Ontario and growing public finance pressures, no party appeared to seek radical restructuring or present a bold plan of action like the 1995 *Common Sense Revolution*. Indeed, as the election approached in spring 2011, the Liberal government commissioned a report by Don Drummond of the public service and its possible restructuring, to be released well after the election, suggesting a government fearful of what it might contain. Instead, they approached the 2011 election prepared to again fight on the old Ontario question of managing prosperity – even when there was none to manage.

### **Conclusion**

This brief overview of the background of Ontario politics prior to the 2011 election has identified three key values in Ontario political culture – loyalty, pragmatic “management”, and identification with Canada. Despite the considerable upheavals of the last thirty years, the first two remain surprisingly enduring as reflected in the leadership and platform of political parties. Identification with Canada is somewhat less certain. But generally, at least for his first two terms in government, Dalton McGuinty appeared to embody the idea that “bland works.” The 2011 election and its “major minority” result show that blandness did not pay off perfectly for the Ontario Liberals. But the positioning of the other party leaders suggests a perception that Ontarians continue to reward loyalty and pragmatic balancing of interests, rather than ideological positioning, sharp confrontation, or change for the sake of change.

### **References (to come)**