

AGAINST THE PEOPLE

How Ford Nation Is Dismantling Ontario

edited by
Bryan Evans & Carlo Fanelli



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1

THE CLASS POLITICS OF CONSERVATIVE RULE

Bryan Evans and Carlo Fanelli

LED BY DOUG FORD SINCE 2018, Ontario's Conservative government is the latest iteration of the province's decades-long trajectory of neoliberal restructuring. The underlying principles of neoliberalism are: tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations (so they'll invest in more machinery and workers); less government (because the market knows better); less unionized labour (so workers cost less); fewer regulations (for efficiency reasons); and more private-sector service delivery (because public services are costly). With it in place, inflation-targeting by the central bank, regressive tax reform, privatization and contracting out, weakened protective legislation and new restrictions on the rights of workers have flourished. In the time since the neoliberal revolution of the 1970s, income and wealth inequality have spiked, economic volatility has worsened and life has become ever more insecure. This is as much the case in Ontario as around the world.¹ Claims that a rising tide lifts all boats have proven to be entirely misleading.

In the elections of 2018 and 2022, the Progressive Conservative campaign slogans were "For the People" and "Get It Done." The question is: "Just what was getting done and for which people?" This book grapples with answers to these questions. The Ford Nation Conservatives are a departure from Ontario's long-held, self-regarding view as being a place of propriety, moderation and tempered progressivism — a polity where, in the decades following the Second World War, publicness, a public sphere and public interest were broadly understood across society as the necessary elements for a well-functioning society and economy. In this respect, the Ford Conservatives are a departure unlike any in modern Ontario politics.

From Family Compact to Ford Nation

The economic and ideological moorings of mid- to late-twentieth-century Ontario are now largely forgotten. The contemporary Ontario Progressive Conservatives, the party of Ford Nation, is a vehicle to move Ontario toward a deep market fundamentalism and thereby remake how citizens relate to their government. The effect is to ultimately accept that there is no such thing as a social contract binding different components of society to one another. It is, in many ways, an Ontario version of Margaret Thatcher's proclamation, "There is no such thing as society," but there is always business. Consequently, the Ford Conservatives benefit from a dimming of the relevance of politics to the lived lives of large parts of the population and particularly to the working class. While the power of business has been expanding for decades, the experience of politics and democracy for ordinary citizens is one of "reduced power, influence and effectiveness" in the context of limited economic regulation, public services and programs.² The expansion of a broad-based apolitics and anti-politics — general disinterest to outright avoidance — is the result. For many, those who remain engaged seek only to advance their specific interests.

It is interesting to think of the Ford Conservatives from a historical perspective by reaching back to the time of the "Family Compact" of the late eighteenth century. The Family Compact was a hand-picked political and economic ruling class. Upper Canada's first Lieutenant-Governor, John Graves Simcoe, fully exploited his powers to appoint persons to office and allocate benefits in an effort to create a "regional oligarchy."³ Members of Simcoe's inner circle were awarded land grants of 3,000 to 5,000 acres.⁴ The main popular grievance was the abuse of public administration as expressed through a "narrow and selfish" distribution of patronage.⁵ A substantial range of positions attached to the Upper Canadian state were dispensed as patronage: executive and legislative councils, "judges, heads of executive departments ... district sheriffs, justices of the peace, coroners, county registrars, customs commissioners, district immigration officers, 1,500 militia officers."⁶ The patronage, even corruption, of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries embedded within the Upper Canadian state and its culture endured into the present.

So while the Ford Conservatives did not invent patronage by any stretch of the imagination, it appears that well-connected insiders are

benefiting materially from these networks of the wealthy.⁷ Moreover, the rather opaque decisions which led to the opening of parcels of land in the Greenbelt, the effective privatization of Ontario Place to a for-profit corporation, and the closure and proposed move of the Ontario Science Centre certainly reinforce such an impression.⁸ Ford's own open musings about curating judicial appointments to ensure only conservative-thinking persons are appointed is a case in point of explicit politicization.⁹

The Ford Nation Conservatives owe the traction of their political and ideological orientation to the economic crisis of the 1970s and the de-industrialization of Ontario which followed through the 1990s, including the decline of assumed economic growth and some degree of economic inclusion. Today, Ontario is, of course, a vastly different place than it was during the post-WWII "golden years," where an ethos of redistributive politics largely prevailed. It is in this historical context that we must situate the current Ford government as part and parcel of the remaking of Ontario's political economy and consequently the re-making of Ontario's Progressive Conservative party.

At various points in Ontario's history, but particularly in the decades following 1945 to the mid-1980s, the capacities of the Ontario government, often reluctantly and through various class and other struggles and contestations, electoral and otherwise, were directed toward building public education (universities, colleges), public health care (hospitals, social assistance), an array of cultural and popular public assets, and even roads, highways and other vital infrastructure. In short, it was an Ontario where social and economic development policies were directed at modernizing an industrial economy. And that development required ensuring some mobility for working-class Ontarians. While this was always uneven and unequally distributed, the elements were put in place to allow for an unprecedented degree of social and economic inclusivity and progress. Not all social groups had a seat at the table, but there was a provincial state able to apply its legal and fiscal powers to reshape what had been a remarkably staid and unequal society. That project officially ended in 1995, with the election of Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris and the "Common Sense Revolution" (CSR) that followed.¹⁰

Of course, the antecedents of what came to be called neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s, as governments across Canada and around the world, struggling to respond to both high inflation and high unemployment, shaped the economic and political history of the decade and

beyond. It was in this cauldron of economic crisis, the most serious since the Great Depression of the 1930s, that the material and political foundations of new conservative movements solidified and gained traction. Like elsewhere, Ontario governments engaged in severe public sector austerity and fiscal constraint, even as workers were bearing the brunt through wage freezes and rising costs of living. All of this reflected the shifting balance of class power in the advanced capitalist economies. The so-called Golden Age of Capitalism was fading, but fading only as business organized in unprecedented ways to roll back the gains of this period.

Yet that early variant of neoliberalism was constrained. In Ontario, for instance, a Progressive Conservative government led by Bill Davis proposed, in response to the rise in petroleum prices, that the government purchase 25 percent of Suncor Ltd. shares for \$650 million. It was an attempt to recreate a provincial version of the then-popular federal crown corporation Petro-Canada. But things soon changed. By 1984, treasurer Larry Grossman emphasized a greater role for the market in the production and delivery of public goods and services: "We must invite more private sector sharing of what has come to be considered as public sector responsibilities.... Given finite taxpayers' dollars, we must provide greater latitude."¹¹ Although the ideological turn within the party was well underway, Ontario's Progressive Conservatives remained broadly pragmatic, right-of-centre, unwilling or unable to make a break from the pragmatic, capitalist centrism that characterized the party's time in government from 1943 to 1985.

Electoral defeat in 1985 and a disastrous result in the 1987 election set in motion the first reinvention of the Ontario Progressive Conservative party since the early 1940s. The end result was the CSR platform that marked a sharp shift to the right where government was explicitly identified as the problem confronting Ontario. The CSR platform executed an unprecedented assault on Ontario's post-war welfare state, including: i) a 30 percent cut to provincial income taxes; ii) a 20 percent reduction to total government spending; iii) the reduction and elimination of various regulations, laws and taxes deemed to impede economic growth; iv) a shrinking of the Ontario public sector workforce as a proportion of the total economy; and v) balanced budget legislation and new marketization standards.¹² The abandonment of pragmatic centre-right politics defined the CSR.

The “Red Toryism,” characterizing the Ontario Progressive Conservatives from 1943 to 1995 — one that accepted a mixed public and private sector economy, some strengthened labour rights, social entitlements and more — was gone. In the eyes of the Harris Conservatives, as with Ford, economic prosperity could only be restored by applying the legal and fiscal powers of the Ontario government toward facilitating business profits. Taxes, public expenditures and regulations had to be cut to facilitate a shift in power and resources away from workers generally to the wealthy and business community. In this regard, the CSR marked the emergence of a new party.

It is in this historical context that the Ford Nation Conservatives share continuity and change with the Harris Common Sense Revolution. First, and most obviously, the Harris and Ford governments are characterized by a certain market fundamentalism. Business interests are sacrosanct and understood as the only credible foundation to the economy. Second, with respect to public finances, both governments have been reluctant to increase public expenditures.¹³ However, while the CSR sought across-the-board cuts in public expenditures and taxes, the Ford Conservatives have increased public expenditures and subsidies for private businesses, especially for large infrastructure projects, while simultaneously restraining public expenditures in health, education and other social programs. Third, while sharing parallels with Harris, the Ford government has demonstrated a particular affinity for more overtly authoritarian tendencies to override the public interest.¹⁴

Where the two governments differ is with respect to the strategy applied to governing. The Harris Conservatives invested heavily in policy agenda and program building which culminated in the CSR platform. The CSR was clear in framing the problems confronting Ontario — government interference, undisciplined workers and welfare cheats — and how they were to be dealt with — via tax cuts, a shrinking of the size and scope of the provincial government and labour market deregulation. The Ford Conservatives did not present the electorate with such a clear and ideologically grounded statement. Instead, it was a return to improvised policy positions with no overarching framework nor a coherent vision. Various gimmicks, like “Buck-a-Beer,” free licence plate stickers, cash payouts to parents of young students and anti-carbon tax stickers on gas pumps, created the impression of a government moving from issue to issue with no overall objective.

With respect to the privatization of public assets, the Ford government has been much more ambitious than its predecessors, controversially moving to sell off or close public assets and lands, privatize and contract out health care,¹⁵ child care¹⁶ and education,¹⁷ and contravene the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* by pushing through municipal restructuring¹⁸ and anti-labour legislation.¹⁹ The motivation for doing so appears unapologetically to provide wide-ranging benefits — from public tax dollars to new decision-making powers — to developer and other business interests.

In contrast to the bombastic approach of the CSR, the Ford Conservatives' agenda has largely occurred via attrition, leaving vacancies unfilled and underspending—which is to say, by stealth. The Ford government quickly got to work cancelling the province's new cap-and-trade program, a process that is estimated to have cost the province more than \$10 billion in lost revenues, legal fees and compensation for cancelled contracts.²⁰ The Financial Accountability Office (FAO) of Ontario estimates that, since forming government, the Ford Conservatives have maintained a steady state of austerity, underspending to the tune of \$5.9 billion on social services annually.

Despite being the largest in the province's history, the 2022–23 budget saw Ontario's total spending per capita stagnate at \$13,065, the lowest in Canada and 20 percent below the Canadian average. Ontario's program spending per capita was also the lowest — \$12,138 versus an average of \$15,389 — while Ontario's tax revenue as a share of GDP was the fourth lowest, declining from 15.2 percent in 2017–18 to 14 percent by 2022–23.²¹ The FAO estimates that the government's planned spending would fall \$3.7 billion short of what is required to fund existing programs and commitments by 2026–27. This means the Ontario government will have to choose between increasing funding, or, more likely, cutting services further in the coming years. Despite Conservatives' long-standing concerns about the *size* of government, these were always secondary to its *scope*; in this regard, public monies spent on underwriting business investment, even doubling the size and cost of premier's office staff — unlike spending on public services — is totally compatible with Ford government's use of taxpayer dollars.²²

The FAO's Economic and Budget Outlook report for 2023–24 to 2028–29 also found that, due to continued disinvestment, government spending will fall short in virtually every sector: health care, education,

postsecondary, justice and social services. The government's budget also reveals less-than-planned spending on infrastructure projects and capital funding for housing programs.²³ It is estimated the Ford government will underspend \$21 billion in health care alone over the next five years as hospital capacity, long-term and home care, surgical waitlists and wait times, emergency departments, and the health-sector workforce crisis worsens. The Council of Ontario Universities has recently warned that they receive the lowest amount of operating funding of all provinces, 35 percent below the Canadian per full-time student average, which has precipitated a postsecondary crisis of unprecedented proportions.²⁴ In fact, a 2023 report by the Office of the Ontario Auditor General raised concerns about more than a dozen value-for-money audits, including: the higher costs of for-profit, health care staffing agencies; longer emergency room wait times and the continuing crisis in long-term care; weak environmental oversights and the lack of public inputs; absence of tourism, arts and cultural sector supports after the COVID-19 pandemic; and the decision to move the Science Centre based on "preliminary and incomplete costing information."²⁵

In a similar vein, the number of Ontarians with developmental disabilities waiting for supportive housing has also grown by 10,000 since the Ford government took office, while funding for core services for children with autism covers less than 20 percent of the over 70,000 children registered in the Ontario Autism Program. More than 800,000 adults and children accessed a food bank in Ontario between April 1, 2022, and March 31, 2023 — an increase of 38 percent over the previous year and 60 percent over pre-pandemic levels.²⁶ In real terms, social assistance rates have never been lower. What's more, it is estimated that some 45 percent of Ontario households spend 30 percent or more of their total income on shelter, the highest on record and the highest rate across the country.

It is little wonder, then, that most Ontarians believe they are worse off today than when the Ford government came to power. A poll conducted by the Angus Reid Institute asking Ontario residents if their government was doing a "good job" on key issues like health care, inflation, housing affordability, education and more, saw that number drop from 42 percent in 2019 to 23 percent by 2024.²⁷ The scale and immediacy of this social crisis will inevitably leave a generational scar.

Ford Nation Populism

There has been a great deal of confusion surrounding the politics of Doug Ford, from those who argue he is neither a conservative nor a populist to others who perceive a pragmatic shift to the centre in the absence of any ingrained ideological underpinnings.²⁸ But, this mistakes appearance for reality. Upon Ford ascending to the helm of the Conservative party after a contentious election process that saw claims of voting irregularities and shifting alliances, a stream of articles followed arguing Ford's win signalled the arrival of Trump-style populism in Canada's most populous province. While sharing certain similarities — extreme wealth, hostility towards the press, combative rallies and anti-establishment diatribes — Ford did not share, at least on the surface, the racial intolerance, paranoia and anti-immigrant sentiment that predominated the populist movements in Turkey, Italy, the Philippines, US and elsewhere. Ford and other populists did, however, share a penchant for simple slogans, hyperbole, little regard for facts and an appeal to “folks” who felt left behind.

This is because the political imaginary of Ford Nation was from the very beginning heterogeneous and malleable. Ford's brand of “retail politics” — that is, the folksy, everyday salesmanship of government policy forged in his time as a Conservative party operator and former Toronto city councillor — offered to make life easier in small but measurable ways that expelled the special interests of elites and cleaned-up government corruption. Ford's brand of personalized, “I'll-get-this-done-for-you” politics avoided nativist and xenophobic dog-whistle politics that had characterized right-wing populism elsewhere, instead emphasizing pocketbook style “respect for taxpayers” that centred on economic insecurity. In this way, Ford's brand of conservatism falls into the long tradition of Canadian populism characterized by a fierce ideological commitment to market fundamentalism and neoliberal austerity.²⁹

While populism is more of an approach to politics than it is an ideological orientation, its main function is to split society into two antagonistic groups: “the people” versus a corrupt elite, or average folks versus the “fat cats.” It is in this context that the Ford government, with its rallying cry against the “gravy train,” parallels the United Farmers and Maritime Rights movements, to Social Credit, the Reform Party and even the CCF.³⁰ Ford's own approach has contributed to a politics that

views opponents as enemies, which has emboldened a greater willingness to challenge democratic norms, and even break the law, as seen with his government's repeated use of the notwithstanding clause.

Another aspect that distinguishes Ford's populism is its diversity, which includes a multiplicity of racialized groups, immigrants and religious denominations. Many of Ontario's most economically disadvantaged were central to the identity of Ford Nation. In both their 2018 and 2022 electoral victories, the Conservatives won not only in the predominantly white rural districts of southern Ontario, but especially in the multiracial suburbs of Toronto, exurban communities and industrial towns. This dominance had historical precedents for Ford. Toronto's 2014 municipal election saw his strongest support among people who identified as East Asian, South Asian and Eastern European. Ford's support was also strongest among those with religious and socially conservative views.³¹ It is little surprise, then, that Ford's successes among low-income and racialized persons replicated these earlier patterns at the provincial level. The Conservatives carried every seat in the predominantly racialized communities of Brampton and Mississauga and won four seats in Scarborough where racialized persons make up three-quarters of the population.

But Ford's success also went further, transcending individualized grievances and espousing a particular form of class politics: "He doesn't deny the existence of climate change but insists that working people shouldn't be made to pay for ambitious carbon reduction schemes."³² And herein lies Ford's success. People are motivated by a variety of issues — from faith and politics, to age, sex, economic security and more — and Ford's conservative class approach collectively mobilized people's individualized experiences. Ford's message hit home with a working class "estrang[e] from the cultural preoccupations of the left," with its "social justice rhetoric that draws heavily on academic vocabulary." As Kory Teneycke, the 2018 campaign manager put it, "'There's been a shift in the things that the progressive left used to talk about.... 'But they've become less connected to working people.'"³³ Indeed, Conservatives were able to successfully win the votes of workers in former NDP strongholds, like Windsor, Hamilton, Timmins, London and Oshawa, areas that experienced sharp manufacturing losses.³⁴ Ford Nation also won support where incomes have fallen the most since the 1970s, which also tend to be among the most heterogeneous.

Revealing Ford, Resisting Ford

As the chapters that make up this book reveal, the Ford government's approach to public policy has been largely driven by the interests of business elites over regular Ontarians. This book is less the last word than it is an evolving testament to the damaging and long-term impacts of Ford Nation on Ontario. Chapters only begin to scratch the surface on issues related to gender and race relations, Indigenous communities, civil and political rights, public spaces, agriculture, manufacturing, finance and a host of other topics that no one volume could possibly cover but are equally important as the issues discussed here.

The Ford government's electoral success shows that working-class conservatism can thrive in places other than the white, Christian, rural heartlands most often imagined as the "natural" home of conservatism. Indeed, Erin O'Toole, former leader of the federal Conservative party, was explicit about chasing votes from unionized workers — a task which his successor, Pierre Poilievre, has continued with early success to run with. As Simon Lewsen explains it: "Ford's political style ... is markedly different from classical starched-collar conservatism or from the more virulent brand of right-wing populism that has recently swept the globe. It is a practical recipe, using whatever ingredients are at hand. But it may have a longer shelf life."³⁵ Given its success, there is growing evidence that suggests Ford's made-in-Ontario approach to populism is a recipe other conservative parties and governments in North America and elsewhere are looking to emulate.³⁶

Previous governments of all partisan hues, with the exception of the 1995–2003 Conservatives, were all, in various ways, concerned with the general public interest. That is to say, they were all interested in implementing some public programs and policies that sought to integrate the social and economic interests of non-elite sections of Ontario society. While this was always limited to the acceptable boundaries of capitalism, there was nevertheless a role for the public sphere in pursuing the public interest. Of course, Ontario has always been a business-first province: patronage for party supporters, special treatment for politically and economically important interests, privileged access to the policy process for some but not others. This is just the reality in our Westminster model of colonial, parliamentary rule. But the Ford Conservatives have taken this to an unashamedly new level: deep austerity, regressive legislation and a privileging of business on all fronts.

The Ford Conservatives, no doubt unwittingly, have taken their playbook directly from the eighteenth-century Family Compact — a twenty-first-century effort to redistribute resources to a small but powerful business elite. As the Old Testament saying goes, whoever has shall be given more. It is this practice of openly allocating public assets and resources to Ontario business elites that marks a qualitative shift in the practice of governing in modern Ontario history. Processes are murky, if not simply unclear. There is little to no effort even at performative virtue signalling with the Ford Conservatives. Shrewd and calculating, the Ford Nation platform's critical part is building on the broad indifference of a large plurality of Ontario's electorate with all things political. Forty years of incremental restructuring have left a deep and pessimistic mark on the mass perception of the formal arena of government and politics. Understood historically, this cynicism is not surprising given that western, electoral systems are not, and never have been, all that democratic to begin with — assuming democracy is understood to mean something more than determining which party will govern every four to five years. Indeed, in the election of 2022, less than half of eligible Ontarians bothered to vote, the lowest participation rate since Confederation. This voter turnout is revealing and gives a good indication of how everyday Ontarians relate to and understand the role of the province in shaping everyday life.

Indeed, Ontario's working class today is more diverse and heterogeneous than ever: from unionized and non-unionized workers to public and private sector workers, blue- and white-collar workers, gig workers, the unwaged, and everything in between. Since the Ford government has come to power, Ontario is more clearly divided between those who live off the work of others, and those who must work longer and harder to keep their heads above water. But class identity, historically weak and uneven in Canada, is confoundingly weaker than ever. In the face of the wider retreat from class, especially among left and social democratic forces, Conservatives have filled this void. If hope is to be found, it will be in moving beyond forms of protest that abstractly indicate what alternatives might be capable of, to fighting back in a concrete way that unleashes the potential for that strength.³⁷ Organizing solely at specific workplaces or around specific issues and constituencies will not add up to the kind of strength and organization needed to surmount the new Gilded Age. Doing so requires an alternative class project with feet

inside and outside of unions and firmly rooted in activist communities that can challenge the limitations of representative institutions in a way that builds class solidarity on the lived experiences of working people. Ultimately, Ontario's working class, like workers everywhere, are the owners of their history, the architects of their liberation. In that endeavour, we are beginning again. New organizations, programs and strategies will assuredly emerge and coalesce over time as an era of sharpened struggles over work, wealth redistribution and climate change push to ask serious questions about what can be done.

EXCERPT