

The H word

With two months to go before the Ontario election, all three party leaders have found themselves called the next Mike Harris. But using the spectre of the former premier in hopes of scaring people at the ballot box could backfire.

BY LINDA NGUYEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS AUGUST 5, 2011



Mike Harris' Common Sense Revolution left a lasting impression on the province, so much so that he's still a hot topic on the campaign trail.

Photograph by: Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen

TORONTO — Nearly 10 years and two elections later, the legacy of former premier Mike Harris still resonates with Ontario voters. Or at least, that's what the main contenders in the upcoming provincial

election are banking on.

With two months to go until voters head to the polls, all three party leaders have found themselves called the next Mike Harris — a label meant to signify a public service slashing, fiscal conservative, far-right ideological premier whose “Common Sense Revolution” left a lasting imprint on the province.

But some political watchers say this election strategy of using a former premier’s reputation in hopes of scaring current constituents at the ballot box may, in fact, backfire.

“(They’re) trying to invoke the mythology of something negative. It’s almost like the bogeyman,” said Alex Sevigny, a communications professor at Hamilton’s McMaster University.

“Invoking these mythologies is dangerous politically because people will interpret it in a vague and gauzy way.”

A few weeks ago, the province’s second-largest public sector union, Ontario Public Service Employees Union, compared the current Liberals under Premier Dalton McGuinty to the Harris government after the government announced the first round of layoffs of bureaucrats — part of an expected 1,900 pink slips that will be handed out in the next eight months.

NDP leader Andrea Horwath also wore the moniker when the Liberals called her “the new Mike Harris of Ontario politics” that same week, criticizing her party’s stance on environmental issues.

But it is Tory leader Tim Hudak who has been repeatedly referred to as a Harris protégé, first at a Liberal convention last October by campaign chairman Greg Sorbara who said: “I think it’s Harris all over again.”

Sevigny, who teaches a course on campaign strategies at McMaster, pointed out that not all Ontarians will remember specifics from the Harris years (1995 to 2002), but many still see him a premier who lowered taxes and cut social programs in an attempt to balance the provincial budget.

In this campaign, those same ideas of reining in public spending and efficiently managing tax dollars remain hot-button topics with voters, especially since the Ontario deficit has ballooned to \$16.7 billion.

This portrayal of McGuinty as having an eye on finances, as Harris did, may appeal to undecided voters and work in his favour on Oct. 6, said Sevigny.

“One of the most powerful ways to communicate in politics is to do metaphors and associations because it’s visceral,” he said. “People like Mike Harris, George W. Bush, Pierre Elliott Trudeau and René Lévesque are tantalizing: They represent big godly things that you can kind of let the voters sort out for themselves.”

That’s why, Sevigny adds, it would be more effective for the political campaigns to be based solely on

ideas rather than hypothesizing which leader resembles Harris the most.

“It’s an unfortunate trend because it takes away from what each party is proposing for Ontarians, whether they’re Liberal, NDP or Conservative,” he said. “The irony is that’s how Mike Harris won, he was successful because he elaborated a very clear, succinct vision for Ontario and then he did it.”

During the eight years Harris was in office, his biggest priority was to tackle a then-record deficit of \$12.4 billion left behind by Bob Rae and the NDP.

This vision resulted in a number of major policy changes, including a 22-per-cent cut to social assistance rates, the creation of a “workfare” program, leasing Highway 407 to a private company and the layoff of more than 6,000 nurses.

Harris also spearheaded the amalgamation of municipalities around Toronto into a “mega-city” in an effort to streamline public services and he introduced standardized tests in schools for students and teachers — to much controversy.

During his tenure, he endured criticism about the tainted drinking-water tragedy in Walkerton, Ont., which resulted in the deaths of seven people. During the native occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park, questions were raised about the government’s role in the events that led to the shooting death of aboriginal protester Dudley George by the Ontario Provincial Police.

Harris, who was contacted for this story, declined to be interviewed. Nevertheless, most agree that the former premier’s biggest legacy will always be the impact he left on the province’s economy.

“The Common Sense Revolution did permanent fiscal damage to Ontario. It was very effective,” said Bryan Evans, a politics professor at Toronto’s Ryerson University.

“It did change Ontario and we still live within the shadow of it, even today. The damage was done in terms of a shrinking of public services, shrinking of quality and encouraged dramatic social and economic polarization.”

Like the debt crisis that consumed the U.S. this week, Ontario is at a crossroads this election because whoever is elected will have to deal with the province’s budget.

“Ontarians have a desire for the government to do a great deal but don’t really want to pay for it,” he said. “It is a height of irresponsibility that we are going to cut taxes here there and everywhere and at the same time, we’re going to spend more. Again, look at the Americans and the trouble they’re in.”

Evans calls the “resurrection of Mike Harris” in this campaign an attempt by both the Liberals and the Conservatives to turn the election into a two-party race and shut out the NDP, which is gaining popularity in opinion polls.

The parties should be cautious about this tactic though because it may result in the NDP coming out on top, said Greg Lyle, a pollster with the firm Innovative Research.

“If the Tories are defined as the wrong change or not enough change, one of the opportunities for Horwath is the same position Bob Rae found himself in,” he said.

“If the two major parties are slagging each other with very negative campaigns then voters become more and more frustrated with the two options and choose the third.”

According to Cheryl Collier, a University of Windsor assistant politics professor, Hudak has the most to lose if he is seen as just another Harris clone.

“It doesn’t do him any favour to be seen as ‘Harris lite’ or ‘mini Harris’ or whatever kind of moniker you throw on him,” she said. “Ontarians aren’t looking for that in this election.”

In the eyes of the public, the comparison between Hudak and Harris can be readily made because the two were close when Harris was premier; Hudak even married Deb Hutton, one of the brains behind Harris’ Common Sense Revolution platform.

Collier says the political climate in Ontario is leaning more to the right, as evidenced by the electoral victories this year of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Toronto Mayor Rob Ford.

“There is an interesting change. Nobody has seen anything scary at the federal level with the Conservatives. We’ve given Harper the majority government and Ontario was one of the provinces to hand him that,” she said. “There is obviously a willingness to give the Conservatives their turn at the bat.”

Postmedia News

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen