

Anatomy of a Lost Election – Ontario

The Ontario provincial election of June 2014 promised to be a major victory for the Progressive Conservative Party. They faced an incumbent Liberal government that was plagued by major financial scandals, an evident gross incompetence, and a soaring provincial debt, with the provincial manufacturing base in decline. Yet the minority Liberal government was returned with a strong majority in winning 58 of 107 seats. What went wrong?

One conclusion is that the Conservatives defeated themselves in the June 2014 provincial election through an abysmal failure of leadership, a neglect to define the public image of their party, and the lack of a compelling election platform. Their shortcomings were obvious.

1) To inspire confidence among the electorate, a political party has to be seen as a competent alternative government. To achieve that public image, the party has to have a leader who inspires confidence, provides leadership on key issues, and has some charisma. In contrast, Tim Hudak, the Progressive Conservative Party leader, was a non-entity -- an ordinary nondescript guy, who had no commanding presence. He failed to convey a vision of what he wanted to accomplish, and appeared incapable of articulating any particular policy in a rationale manner.

2) A leader must define the public persona of his party and what it stands for. The PC Party should have claimed from the onset that they were the party of Bill Davis and John Robarts, a moderate right-of-centre party that believes in good government, compassion, and fiscal responsibility. In the absence of such a self positioning, the Liberals managed to define the PC Party in the public mind as the slash and burn reincarnation of Mike Harris – a branding aided by an ill-advised public service job-cuts commitment made by Tim Hudak, and his former association as a minister in the Mike Harris government.

3) In branding the Party, the Conservative leadership needed to realize that Ontarians are a true conservative people who believe in order, compassion and good government, and do not respond to the anti-public service rhetoric associated with American conservatism. In the absence of such a PC Party identity, during the election Katherine Wynne claimed that the Ontario Liberals were the party of “good government”. It boogles the mind!

4) You do not launch an election campaign by making a commitment to cut 100,000 public service jobs. To the contrary, the message should have been that steps needed to be taken to rein in a bloated provincial bureaucracy, but that a PC government has no intention of cutting front-line workers – policemen, hospital workers, firemen, teachers, and social workers -- who protect the public and sustain the well being of our communities. It needed to be stressed that cuts would be made through natural attrition, primarily through retirements. Such a statement then ought to have been backed up with figures showing how bloated the public service had become under the Liberals, and how many provincial employees retire or leave the public service each year in Ontario. The bald statement about cutting 100,000 jobs was a gift to the Ontario Liberal Party, and made it easy for the Liberals to characterize Tim Hudak as a Mike Harris conservative.

5) You do not go into Ottawa, a key potential swing area, and state that there will be no provincial monies available for Light Rail Transit. To the contrary, Hudak should have said that he was well aware of the severe traffic congestion situation in Ottawa; and that a PC government would ensure that the municipality receives its fair share of whatever funds could be made available for urban transit projects in Ontario.

6) When denouncing Liberal corruption, mismanagement, and waste, you do not just throw out a few references as a statement of fact. The PC leader needed to muster up a strong feeling of moral indignation, to denounce the Liberals for gross deceit and mismanagement, and to accuse the Liberal Party of betraying the voters of Ontario. Hudak should have maintained that the citizens of Ontario deserve better; and then have cited the litany of Liberal boondoggles, the cost of each to Ontario, the heavy debt incurred by the Liberals, and the annual interest cost to Ontario taxpayers. The worst examples of the gross incompetence of the existing Liberal government should have been cited time and time again at each campaign stop to work up a growing public indignation, aided by the revelation of the latest Liberal scandal – the medical building purchase in Toronto. A strong, competent PC leader would have had a field day in denouncing and condemning the provincial Liberals, given all their public misdeeds. However, Tim Hudak lacked the moral indignation, and proved incapable of seizing the initiative and focusing the election on Liberal failings.

7) You do not impress the electorate by promising to create “a million jobs”. It sounds like the boasting of some schoolyard kid, trying to impress his listeners by throwing out a large number. And you certainly do not rely on the projections of a single economist -- no three of whom can agree on anything -- without a very clear idea how such a number of jobs could possibly be created by a PC government. Indeed, the basic flaw in opting for such a grandiose number is that governments do not create jobs. They can only produce the economic conditions which tend to promote job creation. To the contrary, the Conservatives should have stressed that they would focus on job creation through seeking ways to lower the extremely high hydro rates produced by misguided Liberal energy policies.

8) Where the quality of life of Ontarians is concerned, the PC Party should have maintained that it is as interested as anyone in making the province ‘more green’ with less carbon emissions. However, the point that needed to be made was that a PC government would not give blank cheques to companies to develop alternative energies – such as windmill and solar power – and then purchase the electricity produced at almost double the cost of electricity produced by our existing water power, natural gas, and nuclear power plants. In sum, voters needed to be reassured that a PC government would be committed to reducing greenhouse gases wherever practicable. However, it would not do so at the price of saddling Ontario with billions of dollars of debt to produce surplus green energy to sell at a loss to Americans, while raising the price of electricity to Ontarians to the point where industries are being driven out of the province.

9) Retirees needed to be reassured that a PC government would do everything possible to provide for their old age security, keep taxes low, and maintain social services and medical and palliative care, and would seek to improve such services whenever and wherever possible.

10) Students needed to be informed that a PC government would look into the soaring costs of

post-secondary education, and was committed to addressing the excessively high cost of college and university tuition in Ontario.

11) Workers need to be assured that a PC government would promote job creation through reducing high energy costs, and would work with business leaders and major companies to ensure that the jobs created were full-time jobs. Moreover, Conservative candidates needed to profess their commitment to gender equality in the workplace in terms of pay equity and opportunities for promotion, and their support for a strengthening of laws against harassment in the workplace.

12) Municipalities needed to be told that a PC Party was aware of their need for an increase in funding to meet municipal responsibilities; and that a PC government would address that problem by either providing additional funding or uploading some municipal responsibilities to the provincial government.

13) Business leaders, and the general public, needed to be reassured that the PC Party was a party of fiscal responsibility that would work to get provincial government spending under control and to reduce the massive provincial debt. Moreover, the public needed to be further reassured that these objectives could be reached, over a period of time, by a fiscally-competent Conservative administration dedicated to reducing wasteful spending; and that a balanced budget could be realized by good management and frugality, without slashing existing social programs, raising taxes, or driving up energy prices.

14) Lastly, the PC Party ought to have presented its 'team' as constituting a highly-competent alternative government. The high-profile members of the shadow-cabinet ought to have been speaking to a party platform in ridings across the province during the election. You do not focus an election campaign solely on a leader who fails to inspire confidence in the electorate, and neglect to develop a compelling party platform.

Had the Progressive Conservative Party produced a leader of stature, defined the public persona of their party as a traditional right-of-centre Ontario conservative party, and campaigned on a moderate fiscally-conservative platform, they would not have turned a certain victory into a disastrous defeat.

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