

AFTER THE 2014 ONTARIO ELECTION

July 3rd, 2014

The 2014 provincial election delivered a crushing defeat to the Ontario Conservatives, a surprising majority to the Wynne Liberals, and left a deep sense of unease among New Democrat activists in Toronto. But first and foremost, it showed that labour's efforts to stop Tim Hudak's agenda were successful, and that the hard work by thousands of union members over the last eighteen months paid off.

It is easy to forget that our first obligation as a union movement was to avert the total disaster that would unfold if Hudak had become Premier. We only have to look south of the border to see what damage that would have done to workers and their unions. The people of Ontario rejected Hudak's attempt to import extremist Tea Party politics from U.S., especially the concept of cutting 100,000 public service jobs. The Conservatives lost nearly every urban seat, and their leader forced to resign.

However other aspects of this election give reason for concern. In Toronto, the loss of Prue, Schein, and Marchese is a real setback. There was a massive loss of volunteers for NDP incumbent campaigns due to anger about Andrea Horwath's message and direction. People were shocked that Horwath triggered the election with dozens of ridings having no candidates, and a platform that demoralized much of the traditional NDP base. Those losses will impact in politics in Toronto for years to come.

On the other hand, Wynne ran a brilliant campaign – echoing many of labour's policies while downplaying the austerity aspects of her budget. Kathleen Wynne connected to many Toronto voters with a program that sounded both progressive and pro-labour. It will not be a surprise to find the Liberal majority acting much differently than the image created for the election campaign. Labour must focus our efforts now to ensure the positive parts of their platform are implemented, and fiercely resist the austerity policies embraced as soon as the election dust settled.

As a party that fundamentally takes its direction from Bay Street, the Liberals will soon disappoint on many fronts. The Ontario Federation of Labour is taking a labour agenda to the new government - to demand action on labour law reform, poverty wages and corporate taxes, while warning against privatization and austerity. It continues to call for the Ontario Pension Plan to be defined benefit and universal. Labour Council supports these demands, and urges affiliates to prepare for hard work around these issues.

There will be a difficult conversation taking place within the ranks of the NDP and its affiliated unions in the coming months. It will be about more than election tactics – the real question is how to stop the political drift that afflicts many social democratic parties as they believe that electoral success is within their grasp. What is the vision of a political party that wants the loyalty and support of the labour movement? There is no easy answer, but it needs to be a tough discussion that rebuilds confidence of those who care about social and economic justice.