

1

Transitions

Taking Power

Let us begin with the basics. Politics is about power: who has it, how they got it, what they do with it, how they lose it. Politics is not *only* about power, of course, but no matter the issue, questions of power are never very far below the surface. People like having power; once they have it, they like to keep it, and they do not normally find it easy to give it up. Dictators typically rule for long periods, unless they are toppled, and many are the politicians in a democratic country who continue to run for public office until defeated, or until faced with certain defeat.

Constitutional governments fashion norms, rules, political practices, and institutions designed to tame and regulate the exercise of power and to provide for its orderly transfer. As much as possible, they seek to ensure that its exercise serves the interests of the bulk of the population who do *not* hold power. The trappings of constitutional government mediate the emergence of political authority, or the right to rule. We sometimes speak of power being “clothed” with authority, but in reality the relationship between power and authority is much more intimate and synthetic, for in clothing power with authority the nature of power itself is transformed and its exercise is profoundly altered. A tyrant or dictator may seize power but cannot seize legitimacy, for that is something that is granted, not grasped, and it depends on the recognition of others, not on the will or brute force of the political actor. Power without authority exists as long as the capacity to retain it continues; power *with* authority – the legitimate exercise of power – derives its force and its durability in part from the act of recognition itself. The sovereign is sustained not simply by the sword, but by the citizens’ willing consent.

Conceptually, therefore, a transition, the taking of power, can be an act of one or two dimensions. An unconstitutional transition is an act of one dimension, in which power is taken, pure and simple. A constitutional transition is an act of two dimensions, in which power is taken by those

recognized as having won the right to rule; power is taken as authority is granted. Constitutional transitions also entail the giving up of power by those who recognize and accept that they have lost the authority to rule. The event may be seamless and unitary in appearance, but analytically it is binary.

The distinction between these two kinds of acts – and, behind them, the distinction between unconstitutional and constitutional government – is in evidence throughout the contemporary political world, as new states are formed on the ruins of the old and unfree societies dismantle old regimes and seek to replace them with democratic systems based on popular consent. The transition from one regime to another – in which one kind of political system is supplanted by another that is qualitatively different – is a more fundamental matter than a transition in government power within a given regime. Regime change has proven to be a difficult course to navigate, and countries in the throes of such transformations can exhibit elements of both the old and the new systems operating awkwardly side by side for a time. In recognition of this fact, Freedom House, the American think tank that attempts to chart the progress of liberty in the world, places countries into three categories: free, unfree, and partially free. In Russia, several months prior to the 1996 presidential election, a constitutional lawyer at Moscow State University was asked by one of the authors if she thought that Boris Yeltsin would win the upcoming election. She replied, “Yes, I think he will. But if he thinks he won’t, there probably won’t be an election.” Clearly, the roots of constitutional government have yet to take hold deeply in Russian soil.

Nestled within the transition from one regime to another, in such circumstances as these, is the process by which governments themselves are changed. One of the vital signs of the presence or absence of constitutional government is the way in which the political community handles the reassignment of government power. The capacity to effect an orderly shift of government power and authority presupposes a distinction between the political office and the officeholder – between the monarchy and the person who is king or queen, between the prime ministership and the politician who is holding the office, between the presidency and the sitting president. The office continues while the officeholders come and go. A transition from this perspective, then, is a change set within a framework of continuity: the transfer of the responsibilities and prerogatives of office from one person to another. A government may be understood as an interlocking set of offices, and a government transition transfers responsibility for this set of offices from one group of people to another. One of the most reliable indicators of constitutional political order is the capacity of the regime to manage changes of government in an orderly, peaceful, and routine fashion.

Behind the distinction between office and officeholder lies another: the distinction between the state and the government of the day. Unless the authority in question is charismatic, and therefore based directly on the personality of the leader, the right to rule derives from the structures of the state, from the offices and functions it creates, and from the processes it provides for the ordering and channelling of political power. Government itself is a concrete manifestation of the state, and is the principal means by which state sovereignty is activated. Governments come and go with the political tides; the state is more stable and enduring, if more abstract.

Government Transitions

The transfer of government power is one of the most delicate moments in the life of any political order. If politics is about power – getting it and keeping it – a transition is the moment when those who have power, give it up, and when those who seek it, take it. It is an occasion of high sensitivity, like the first handshake in the forest.

Transitions in constitutional regimes are concentrated points of light in the political system, exposing as few other moments or occasions do the deeper values of the political order, the first-order principles beneath the ideologies that even the fiercest political enemies hold in common. Sovereignty is in transit: the affairs of state are momentarily arrested as they are transferred from the care of one leader or set of politicians to the keeping of another.

Government transitions in a constitutional order may best be understood by reference to what they are not. They are not a species of coup d'état, in which one group takes power from another by violence or the threat of violence. Nor are they shifts in the political regime, involving the replacement of one set of political institutions with another, as in the conversion from presidential to parliamentary models, or from colonial to self-governing status. Still less are they revolutions, which in their fullest expression not only overturn the political order but also involve social and economic upheaval.

An essential requirement of a constitution is that it establish authoritatively the rules for government transition. Elaborate laws of succession, for example, regulate transitions in monarchies. The king is dead, long live the king; but who will be king? The rules of royal succession in the United Kingdom are worked out to the nth possible successor to the throne, which shows just how seriously the shift in the political power of kings and queens was taken to be when they still possessed active sovereignty. This seemingly excessive elaboration of transition arrangements grew out of the painful realization of what could happen to the realm if powerful contenders vied for the crown. A failed succession, a botched transition, was at times the prelude to civil war. All too often the death of an

entrenched autocratic leader brings on a succession crisis and profound political problems.

In democratic countries, changes in government after general elections are the chief means by which political change is consciously effected. Clearly, major policy shifts may occur as a result of the pressure of external events or through re-evaluation of existing priorities and approaches, and as such may be introduced in these circumstances by a sitting government. But insofar as a political society has the capacity autonomously to consider and implement new policies and chart new directions in governance, the principal mechanism for doing so is the replacement of one government with another, the assumption of power by a new leader and/or a new political party that has emerged victorious in a general election. This is the device that injects new blood, new energy, and new direction into a democratic system of government. Similarly, declining to elect a new leader and party into office is the device by which an electorate supports continuity, rewards good management, and authorizes incremental change.

The transitions that concern us are thus the peaceful, institutionalized, constitutionally sanctioned transfers of power and authority within democratic regimes from one set of elected leaders to another. In highlighting these positive characteristics of transitions we do not mean to imply that all transitions are of a piece; clearly some are carried out much more effectively than others. Accordingly, as we prepare to evaluate particular transitions, it is useful to address more precisely what transitions entail in our democratic society.

What Is a Transition?

Something that is conceptually akin to a transition, as we have been employing the term, occurs when a government party changes leaders and a new premier takes over, or when a party is returned to office with a new electoral mandate and perhaps a new policy direction or a different cabinet line-up. We limit our attention, however, to instances of one political party supplanting another.

When do transitions begin and end? It is possible to think of transitions in a temporally restricted fashion; for example, as the period between the election and the swearing-in of the new government, or in an expansive fashion, as the period beginning with the preparation for government, which often occurs well before the election campaign begins, to the end of the incoming government's "settling-in" period, which often can extend up to the end of its first year in office.¹ It is probably a mistake to attempt to define government transitions too precisely in terms of time periods, rather than in terms of the nature of the activity and the process itself. In this book, we think of a government transition in fairly simple terms:

as the process by which a new government assumes responsibility for the levers of power. This means getting into a position to take and implement decisions, but not the decisions themselves. Thus we do not include everything that a new government does in its early days. The policy and political decisions of the new government are not, *per se*, part of the transition; getting into a position to take them, however, is.

Transitions are composed of two distinct stages and several streams of activity. The first stage, the preparation stage, occurs in the period prior to the election, when the various actors are readying themselves for a possible change of government. It is marked by several streams of activity that traditionally do not touch one another, or touch one another only slightly. The political party or parties that see themselves as having a shot at dislodging the government will typically engage in some planning and preparatory work; and the bureaucracy will ready itself, with a greater or lesser degree of sophistication, for whatever might result from the election. The second stage, the actual taking of power, starts after the election. At this point the activity of unsuccessful parties ceases, and the streams of activity of the successful party and the bureaucracy converge. Taking power is pre-eminently a matter of assuming control of the machinery of government; in a parliamentary democracy this means, for all practical purposes, creating a cabinet of responsible and effective ministers and gaining control of the bureaucracy. If, in an unconstitutional coup d'état, the first thing that the new regime wants to control is the means of public communication – the radio and television stations, the newspapers, the airports, and the train stations – in a constitutional coup, which is what a government transition after an election amounts to, the top priority is to secure the direction of the means of governing – the public service.

Transitions in Canada

Recognizing the importance of government transitions, researchers and analysts in the United States have devoted serious attention to this subject and have built a substantial literature on it. Much less work has been done on transitions in parliamentary systems.² The reasons for this discrepancy likely lie in the fundamental differences between the American congressional-presidential system and the Westminster cabinet-parliamentary system. The parliamentary system permits the voter to elect a government, not just a chief executive officer who will then create a government, as does the US president. The parliamentary party system normally makes it clear who the new governing team will be at the point that the election is won. If it is the party that has been the official opposition (as is typically the case), both the leader and the senior party politicians will probably be reasonably well known to the electorate, making the taking of power and the naming of the cabinet more predictable or routine

events. Moreover, the scale and complexity of American transitions differ qualitatively from those of parliamentary transitions primarily by virtue of the hundreds of top-level bureaucrats who must be recruited to replace those dismissed because of their political links to the outgoing administration. In parliamentary transitions, the permanent officials are key players in making transitions work, whereas in the US, much of the transition is about replacing senior officials.

In addition, the informality and the practices of confidentiality that characterize most systems following the British parliamentary model may discourage intensive inquiry into the transition phenomenon. More speculatively, it may be that a constitutional monarchy, in which the principle of continuity is represented by the crown as head of state, makes shifts in who holds government power seem less remarkable. In the United States, the presidency combines the functions of both the head of state and the head of government, making the election of a new person to that office the British-parliamentary equivalent of the selection of a new prime minister and the accession to the throne of a new monarch combined.

In any event, when we turn our attention to Canada, the lack of writing by scholars and practitioners alike immediately becomes apparent. Considering the frequency and the importance of government transitions, surprisingly little is known about taking power in Canada. Canadians, at the federal, provincial, and territorial levels, have known over 100 transitions since Confederation.³ Yet the only book about them is *Taking Power: Managing Government Transitions*, a 1993 collection of studies edited by Donald Savoie. This volume contains five analytical or comparative chapters, one on the 1993 federal transition and the rest on transitions in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia. Beyond this the published academic literature on Canadian transitions consists of a smattering of journal articles and book chapters. Michelmann and Steeves offer a detailed look at the Devine government's purge of the Saskatchewan civil service when it took office in 1982.⁴ Former Saskatchewan Premier Allan Blakeney and academic Sandford Borins devote a chapter of their book, *Political Management in Canada*, to the question of transition.⁵ Plasse examined the 1976 Quebec transition through a focus on the ministerial *chefs de cabinet*.⁶ Bourgault and Dion have written a series of papers examining transitions in Ottawa and Quebec City from various theoretical perspectives, but primarily focusing on the roles of deputy ministers, ministers, and political staff.⁷

This literature covers a number of cases spanning the country – though not, significantly, over a long period: only in the 1980s did scholars turn their attention to transition – under a variety of circumstances. Common to all, however, is the attempt to sort out relations among a complex set of variables falling into three broad categories: party ideology/program,

government structures, and people. Transition efforts attempt to bring all three into balance, but inevitably the most problematic and important aspects of transitions are those involving people: politicians (and their staff) and bureaucrats. Party ideology, as manifested in the agenda that the incoming government party wishes to implement, may be ill defined or crystal clear, and it may be moderate and incremental or sweeping in scope and speed. However, although political realities may over time bring about modifications to the agenda and the party's commitment to it, during transition they are little subject to change. As well, a striking feature evident from the literature is the infrequency of major structural change. Few incoming administrations do other than tacitly agree to work within the structural arrangements they have inherited from the previous government; almost all tinker with some features of government organization, but few attempt to reshape it to any substantial degree. In some cases this reflects lack of interest and understanding of government structure, while in other cases the new government knowingly leaves structures largely intact, calculating that the potential gains from extensive reorganization are outweighed by (or lack the priority of) other considerations, at least during the period of transition.

Thus the greatest practical opportunities for change involve the personnel of government. Opportunities, however, are not always seized effectively, nor are changes always positive. Bourgault and Dion, for example, examine the conflict that beset the first years of the Mulroney government as a result of the establishment during the transition of "chiefs of staff" in ministers' offices. The idea was to impose these high-powered political figures between ministers and their senior bureaucratic officials and thereby to alter their relations and the role of the permanent officials.⁸ This illustration is provided not to draw attention to the experiment's failure, or to the cause of its failure, but to underline the centrality of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats.

If the literature thus inclines us to highlight the interaction of key political and bureaucratic players, it also reminds us to do so within the context of party program and formal government structures. The 1995 Tory transition is best understood in terms of how the transition planners integrated these sets of concerns and in terms of the potential friction points between them.

Our Study

Savoie summarizes the situation aptly in his observation that "there exists very little literature on transitions in Canada. How they are planned, who participates, and how they are executed often appears to be shrouded in a veil of secrecy."⁹

Our volume contributes to the literature on Canadian transition by

studying the 1995 Ontario transition when Mike Harris's Tories took power after the 8 June election and began to implement their "Common Sense Revolution." Unlike most previous transition studies, it is based on interviews and information gathering that occurred before and during, as well as after, the election. Typically, transition studies have had to content themselves with looking back at the event after it has occurred. Our methods and approach are described more fully in the Preface.

During much of Canada's history, planning for the taking of power appears to have been a rather casual matter for politicians and party activists, and readying the affairs of state for the possible arrival of a new government seems to have been a relatively informal process for senior public officials. When government was smaller and simpler, the need to engage in elaborate preparation was much reduced. In addition, when parties stayed in office for a generation or more – as has happened often over the course of Canadian history – the inclination to devote special attention to the process of transition was understandably reduced.

In recent years, however, the situation has been changing. For some time, major federal political parties and the federal public service have engaged in sophisticated transition planning, and this practice has been growing in several provincial jurisdictions. This is true not just of large provinces such as Ontario and Quebec but also of smaller jurisdictions such as New Brunswick.¹⁰ Given the pressure on politicians to make good quickly on their promises, together with the expectation that the bureaucracy will deliver efficient, flexible public service, we see little reason to believe that this trend will wane in the foreseeable future.

A fuller understanding of transitions would be beneficial in three respects. First, as crucial and recurrent events in a democracy, transitions need to be examined and accounted for as integral to the process by which free people govern themselves. Simply put, effective transitions are about good government and are thus fitting and appropriate subjects for academic inquiry. The relation between politicians and bureaucrats, long a central concern of students of government and public administration, comes into particularly sharp focus during transitions. Second, practical benefits can be derived from improved understanding. Transitions can be done well or badly. The act of taking power is not in itself ideological or partisan. How it is done may well serve partisan purposes, but a successful transition has more to do with planning, organization, technical considerations, and sheer good luck than with ideological purity. To the extent that this is so, one jurisdiction can learn from another: a political party can draw advantage from understanding how another party handled the taking of power, regardless of partisan stripe; public servants in one part of the country can organize their transition work more effectively, knowing how it has been done elsewhere. Third, greater public discussion of the

phenomenon may make it easier to introduce reforms to improve the quality of transitions without in any way undermining the principles of parliamentary government. Based on our analysis, we propose means of institutionalizing communication channels among the key transition players. In sum, our intention is to place a good deal of emphasis on the practical lessons that might be drawn from the Ontario experience; that will be the focus of the closing chapter.

Let us now set the context for our analysis of transitions in Ontario by sketching out briefly some of the salient features of the province's recent political experience.

The Ontario Context

On several counts the 1995 Ontario election proved a remarkable affair, not least because for the first time in living memory, virtually everyone – politicians as well as pundits and voters – expected it to bring about a change of government. While this elemental fact held obvious implications for transition planning, it is not the only feature of note that needs to be understood in order to place the Tory transition in context. By way of illustration, the 1995 election was the third in a decade in which a party entering the campaign with a seemingly insurmountable lead in the polls failed to register a victory. The following thumbnail sketch of recent Ontario politics highlights the developments and events most germane to our treatment of recent transitions.

For many years, of course, transitions were unknown in Ontario for the very good reason that the government did not change. From 1943 to 1985, the Progressive Conservative Party governed the province without interruption; was dubbed Ontario “the longest surviving one-party state this side of Albania.” The long Tory hegemony depended on a complex confluence of factors: politically astute leadership; competent, moderate, responsive government that embodied the apparently contradictory principles suggested by the party's curious appellation, “progressive conservative”; a formidable political organization; the benefits of having a party of a different political stripe hold power in Ottawa for much of that time; a perennially divided opposition (which produced that political *rara avis*, a stable three-party system); the well-known distorting effects of the first-past-the-post electoral system, which routinely converted a minority electoral following (usually below 45 percent of the vote) into comfortable legislative majorities; and a prolonged period of prosperity in which Canada's richest province “shared all the booms and only some of the busts” of Canada's post-war economic history.¹¹

Thus during this era, despite brave words come election time, “the opposition, in their heart, never really imagined they would one day be the government,” as one long-time Liberal MPP put it.¹² In consequence,

when newly chosen Tory Leader Frank Miller called an election for 2 May 1985 with his party cruising at over 50 percent in the polls, the conventional wisdom was that the only outcome in doubt was the contest for second place. Yet it soon became evident that the Conservatives' magic had deserted them. Miller and his supporters had pushed the party too far to the right, effectively abandoning the middle of the political spectrum to David Peterson's Liberals. The Tory political machine, which had not been maintained in top running order during the later years of Bill Davis's premiership (1971-85), was perceptibly weakened by bitter internal division over Davis's stunning decision to overturn decades of Tory dogma by granting full public funding to Roman Catholic separate schools. And the usually sure-footed Conservatives ran an ineffective, at times inept, campaign.¹³

When the election dust had settled, the Conservatives held a slim margin in seats – fifty-two to the Liberals' forty-eight – but were unable to hold on to power when, after protracted negotiations, the NDP threw their twenty-five seats behind the Liberals, making David Peterson premier. The Liberals and the New Democrats signed a unique "Accord," in which the NDP undertook to support the Liberals for two years in return for the Liberals' public commitment to a detailed policy agenda and a guarantee not to call an election for two years. The Accord period of Liberal minority rule – it was not, as it was often described, a coalition since the NDP held no cabinet seats – witnessed extensive policy innovation and government activism that proved popular with the voters. Thus, when Peterson pulled the electoral plug just weeks after the two-year deal with the NDP had expired, the only real issue was how handsomely the people would reward the Liberals. Quite handsomely indeed, as it turned out: with 47 percent of the popular vote the Liberals took ninety-five seats to the NDP's nineteen and the Tories' sixteen.

The second Liberal mandate (1987-90) unfolded rather differently from the first. A senior public servant seconded into Peterson's office summed it up aptly in remarking, "I've never seen a government age so quickly."¹⁴ Though the province continued to enjoy remarkable prosperity, with annual growth rates of 5, 6, and 7 percent, the Liberals seemed to have shot their reformist bolt during the Accord years, so that the government lacked a clear policy agenda.¹⁵ Peterson's preoccupation with matters constitutional in the latter stages of his mandate contributed to the drift. A series of mini-scandals sapped the government's energy; though none was very serious by itself, they all contributed to an image of impropriety and unsavoury ties to powerful interests. Still, the opposition parties seemed in no position to capitalize on the Liberals' vulnerability; the Conservatives were dispirited and disorganized, and the NDP had not captured public support to any significant degree. Indeed, NDP Leader Bob Rae had privately made plans to quit provincial politics following what

he fully expected to be his third disappointing defeat. The Liberals thus began their 1990 campaign with a commanding lead in the polls.¹⁶

In the phrase that would tellingly reappear with respect to the Liberals in 1995, their support in 1990 proved “a mile wide but an inch deep.” The Liberals ran a weak campaign and suffered not only from attacks on their integrity (reinforced by a widespread public perception that their early election call, after barely three years of a five-year mandate, was nothing more than a cynical power grab) but also from Peterson’s close association with the disastrous implosion of the Meech Lake Accord a few weeks before they headed to the hustings. The NDP ran a strong, largely error-free campaign but won as much by default – for many electors, the Liberals and the Conservatives were discredited, while the NDP had never been given the opportunity to govern – as by converting voters to its policies and programs. As well, for once the New Democrats were extraordinarily blessed by the electoral system, which transformed their vote share of just under 38 percent into a comfortable legislative majority (74 of 130 seats).¹⁷

If Bob Rae and his New Democrats swept to power through good fortune, their luck deserted them almost immediately. By the time they took office, Ontario had already entered the worst prolonged economic downturn since the Depression, leaving the NDP with declining revenues, soaring social welfare costs (exacerbated by a federal policy on transfer payments that singled out Ontario for especially punitive treatment), and precious little fiscal room to manoeuvre. The severity of the recession might not have necessarily sealed the NDP’s fate, but the range of adverse political circumstances they faced – some of their own making, some not – virtually assured that Bob Rae would be a one-term premier. The NDP made a series of decisions that cut into their traditional base of support, most notably an embarrassing reversal of their commitment to introduce a comprehensive public auto insurance scheme and the well-intentioned but politically disastrous “social contract” exercise, which cut public spending in part by abrogating collective agreements with powerful public sector unions. The unrealistic expectations held by the party’s social activist allies as to what an NDP government could and should do led inevitably to disappointment and disillusion. At the same time, the NDP had to contend with some of the most virulent anti-government interest group campaigns ever mounted in Ontario politics.¹⁸

Even aside from these pervasive problems, it was scarcely imaginable that the NDP could repeat its rich harvest of seats with so few voters as had favoured them in 1990. Nor was it at all likely that the essentially urban NDP could hold the dozen rural or semi-rural seats that had secured its victory the last time around. Finally, the NDP, which had come to power in no small measure on its reputation for integrity, found itself enmeshed in a debilitating series of minor scandals. Where the Liberals’

peccadilloes had mostly involved dubious fundraising practices, NDP ministers proved clean financially but subject to repeated lapses of judgment that called into question both their probity and their competence. As much as anything in politics is preordained, the NDP were certain to be defeated when they went to the people. But who would replace them?

For many, the answer was so obvious that the question was hardly worth posing. The NDP's decline in the polls from mid-1991 on was matched by Liberal gains. Most of Peterson's best ministers had been re-elected in 1990, giving the Liberals a strong and experienced front bench. Moreover, the Liberals could reasonably expect most voters to associate their recent time in office not with petty scandals but with unbridled good times. Even the omens from Ottawa were promising: having vanquished the reviled Mulroney Conservatives (albeit under new leader Kim Campbell) in the 1993 general election, Jean Chrétien's Liberal government continued to enjoy strong popularity among Ontario voters. The Ontario Liberal Party was well financed and well organized.

Two areas did concern some Liberals: leadership and policy. In 1992 the Liberals had become the first major Ontario party to choose a woman as its leader. In a toughly fought, extremely close battle, Thunder Bay MPP Lyn McLeod, who had been first elected in 1987 and who had held mid-range portfolios in the Peterson cabinet, defeated veteran MPP Murray Elston, one of the most senior and respected of Peterson's ministers. McLeod proclaimed herself a proponent of a "new" non-confrontational politics of inclusion and consensus building, but – as is typical of Ontario opposition leaders – made little impact on the public; shortly before the election, half of those who planned to vote Liberal were unable to identify the party's leader.¹⁹ As journalist John Ibbitson wrote, "Most people who had met Lyn McLeod found her intelligent, warm, committed and capable. The problem was, most people in Ontario hadn't met Lyn McLeod."²⁰ On the policy front, although party committees were at work churning out earnest policy papers, the popular impression was that the Liberals didn't particularly stand for anything and were waiting to assume power by default as the NDP government self-destructed.

And why not? The Tories posed no threat. They had managed to stave off annihilation in the 1990 election, but only just. Millions of dollars in debt, the party had closed its provincial office and laid off its permanent staff as economy measures. Leader Mike Harris was dismissed by opponents and pundits as a former golf pro who had made little mark in his time in the legislature; his wooden speaking style and unfashionably right-wing views also told against him. The Tory caucus was a largely rural rump short on experience and profile – all of the senior ministers of the Davis era were long departed. Throughout the entire NDP term, the Conservatives languished at or below 25 percent in the polls. The Tories

apparently hammered the final nail into their own coffin when they released their political manifesto, *The Common Sense Revolution*, in May 1994. Bad enough that they had defied conventional wisdom by exposing their platform to scrutiny and attack far in advance of the election, but, many observers concluded, the uncompromising hard-right tone of the document was simply unacceptable to the vast majority of Ontario voters.

When the election was finally called, for 8 June 1995, the common assumption of an easy Liberal victory found ready support: a typical poll in the first week of the campaign put the Liberals at 52 percent, the Tories at 26 percent, and the NDP at 17 percent.²¹ And yet, all was not what it seemed on the surface. The Tories (who disavowed the term “Conservative” lest they be tarred with lingering public distaste for their federal brethren) were in the final stages of a remarkable return from the political scrap heap.²²

The party, which had been effectively taken over by a small band of young, committed ideologues, had paid off most of its debt, rebuilt its organization, and established a strong policy agenda. Strategists had crafted a clear, straightforward image for the party and the leader and had worked out in intricate detail a plan for setting the agenda during the campaign and positioning itself to reap the rewards. Party polling and focus groups confirmed not only that *The Common Sense Revolution* had struck a positive chord with many Ontarians but also that significant electoral gains were to be made by pushing such political “hot buttons” as anti-welfare sentiment and opposition to employment equity. Once the election was under way, the Tories’ carefully laid plans were executed with almost flawless precision.

If the Conservatives’ brilliantly conceived and expertly conducted campaign did just about everything right, the Liberals’ campaign was misdirected and prone to error. Liberal strategists underestimated the Conservatives until well into the campaign, and they incorrectly believed that they could repeat the impressive success of the 1993 federal Liberal campaign built around unveiling a “red book” of detailed policy statements. The Liberals entered the election without making it clear why people should vote for them rather than against the other parties. Their leader was little known yet saddled with a “flip-flop” image based on a well-publicized reversal of her stand on gay rights. The Liberals’ red book policies came across either as confusingly complex or as watered-down versions of the Tories’ Common Sense Revolution proposals.

The New Democrats were never really in the running and mounted a curious “no promises” campaign, whose main objective was ensuring the party’s continued existence as a viable political force.

By midway through the campaign, the Tories were surging in the polls while the Liberals’ support had crumbled. For a few days, a minority

government – perhaps Tory, perhaps Grit – seemed possible, but the Conservatives continued to widen their lead over the Liberals. Election night saw 82 Conservatives returned on 45 percent of the vote; the Liberals garnered 31 percent of the vote, good for 30 seats; the NDP managed 17 seats on 21 percent of the vote; 1 seat went to an independent.

Mike Harris would be premier and his Common Sense Revolution would transfix Ontario. The Tories had come from nowhere to capture the government of Canada's wealthiest, most populous province, but surely a party so far distant from power so recently would be unprepared to govern. In the event, they proved extraordinarily ready to take power. As in the electoral realm, the Conservatives demonstrated remarkable foresight and self-confidence in their transition planning, as will be seen in subsequent chapters.

But before examining the Tory transition, let us set the stage by sketching out Ontario's experience with two previous transitions, in 1985 and 1990.