

September 30, 2011

It's entirely understandable that after two terms of Dalton McGuinty and his Liberal government, many Ontario voters are looking around for other options. That's the nature of politics — particularly in difficult times. McGuinty is the voice of experience and has a solid record of improving public services, but no leader emerges after eight years in office without his share of mistakes and a chorus of critics shooting holes in what he's done and how he's done it.

Tim Hudak's Progressive Conservatives and Andrea Horwath's New Democrats both claim to offer the "change" they feel voters want. While they have worked hard to relate to voters' insecurities and fears about jobs and rising costs, neither has put forward credible plans that would address those concerns.

As Canada heads once again into uncharted economic territory, Ontario needs a government that will deliver the services people rely on, can be trusted to make the difficult decisions that seem inevitable, and also has a vision for a brighter future — along with a plan to get us there. McGuinty and the Liberals are the best choice for the next four years. Their record is a strong one and they are the only party with policies that try to come to grips with the global issues we face.

Under the Liberals, Ontario's education system has become a world leader. They brought in full-day kindergarten. High-school graduation rates have gone up sharply. And more students than ever are going on to college and university. The government invested heavily in hospitals, doctors and nurses and, more recently, has begun to implement important cost-saving measures in health care. It stabilized our electricity system; the blackout of 2003 is a bad memory and we no longer have to wonder whether the lights will go out again.

Their plan for the next four years would build on those achievements. A 30 per cent reduction in undergraduate tuition for most students would help more young people afford the education they need and on which Ontario's future success depends. A tax credit to help seniors retrofit their homes, funding for more house calls by doctors, and more home care will help the elderly stay home longer — and out of expensive hospitals and nursing homes. McGuinty, far more than Hudak, shows he recognizes the need to restructure the health-care system with an emphasis on prevention, early intervention and less costly community-based care.

McGuinty has proven he is willing to make politically difficult but necessary decisions. Indeed, that's where much of his unpopularity comes from. He did not shy away from bringing in the harmonized sales tax last year to give Ontario businesses the competitive edge they need. He eased the burden on individuals by cutting income taxes and providing interim payments, but the HST remained such a hard sell that his opponents have built their election platforms around criticizing and tinkering with it. Tellingly, though, neither the Conservatives nor the NDP actually proposes to scrap the tax.

On energy, McGuinty would have been more popular if he continued the game that previous premiers played — under-investing in our electricity system and hiding rising costs within the provincial budget. Instead, he made the right decision for Ontario's future. Hydro bills are higher, but despite the claims by Hudak and Horwath that has little to do with the Liberals' green energy policies. It has far more to do with investments in new power supply (nuclear, natural gas and hydroelectric), transmission lines and paying down debt left over from previous governments. The suggestion by Hudak and Horwath that electricity will be much cheaper if they win isn't credible.

The Liberals' controversial [Green Energy Act](#) aims to create the foundation for a future economy. If implemented properly, it will help to create the new, high-paying jobs the province desperately needs. Green energy manufacturing jobs have already begun to replace those lost because of the global recession, a high Canadian dollar and a decline in traditional manufacturing. Now, McGuinty says he plans to "out-compete the world" by further reducing corporate and small business taxes, attracting investment and jobs with trade missions abroad,



Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty speaks to the media during a campaign stop at the University of Western Ontario. (Sept. 8, 2011)

DAVE CHIDLEY/THE CANADIAN PRESS

and fostering new innovative industries with funds for start-up companies.

It's not a sure bet, certainly. But as a vision and a plan it is far superior to harking back to the good old days of a low dollar and cheap energy, as Hudak and Horwath do. Their nostalgia for a time when a family could achieve middle-class security with little education and a lifelong factory job has led them to propose policies that would ill-equip us for the future. Times have changed, permanently. McGuinty is the only leader who demonstrates a clear understanding that to succeed in the global economy Ontario must move forward, adapt and try new things.

The past eight years haven't been "all sunshine and apple pie," as McGuinty acknowledged in the televised leaders' debate. Whatever the outcome of Thursday's election, the next four years won't be either. Ontario has a \$15 billion deficit, largely because of the last recession, and the global economic outlook is full of risk.

So, beyond what's in their platforms, a big part of the next government's mandate will be to cut costs where it can, protect services where it must and have the judgment to strike the right balance. On this front, as well as the strength of their record and plans for the future, McGuinty's Liberals are the best choice.