

Tories put Harris days behind them

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NIAGARA FALLS, ONT.—If there are any remaining doubts, this weekend's gathering of the provincial Conservatives should lay them to rest: This is no longer Mike Harris's party. Under the leadership of John Tory, a Bill Davis acolyte, the Ontario *Progressive* Conservatives (the qualifier is always used now in party literature) are moving back to the centre.

This point is underscored in the half-dozen "white papers" that were prepared for the party's policy conference this weekend in Niagara Falls.

Gone is the call for sweeping tax cuts and accompanying reductions in government spending that formed the core of Harris's right-wing platform in 1995 — the "Common Sense Revolution."

Gone are the scorn for the "bloated bureaucracy" at Queen's Park and the pledge to cast off thousands of civil servants.

Gone is the proposal to privatize Hydro, the LCBO, TVO, and other government assets.

Gone are the welfare bashing and the promises to cut benefits and impose "workfare."

In their place are suggestions to continue doing things pretty much as the Liberal government has been doing them, but to do them better.

To be sure, there are still some remnants of the old Harris approach in the white papers. The paper on the economy, for example, includes a reference to the need for "competitive tax policies" and various suggestions that taxes on both corporations and individuals are too high.

But this is tempered later on in the same paper by the assertion that "we simply cannot cut every tax that is too high" and by a suggestion that balancing the budget should be the top priority.

No credence is given by the paper to the old Harrisite mantra that "tax cuts pay for themselves."

As for the paper on education, it suggests the return of Harris's "professional development program," a euphemism for teacher testing, which the Liberal government scrapped.

But the paper makes no reference to bringing back Harris's private school tax credit, although we are told this will likely come later, in a modified form.

The education paper also suggests backing away from the Harris-era Safe Schools Act, with its policy of zero tolerance of serious misbehaviour in our schools.

In the Conservative party, that act used to be considered Holy Writ.

The paper on health care suggests "further involvement" of the private sector. But it adds that private-sector delivery of health care must be done "within our publicly funded, single-payer system."

In other words, no two tiers, not even on a limited basis.

These white papers are not the final word on Conservative policy, of course.

As their name suggests, they are merely proposals, subject to extensive rewriting before they become planks in the party platform, which is expected to be finalized next year.

And delegates to the weekend conference are being asked to participate in the rewrite.

At the end of each policy paper is a series of open-ended questions, with space for the delegates to provide answers.

The Harrisites in the party — and there are still many of them — could seize the opportunity to push for much tougher language.

And they might be egged on by various speakers who are scheduled to address the conference, including some neo-conservatives from the Fraser Institute.

Also scheduled to speak to the conference, however, are such progressive thinkers as Fraser Mustard and Duncan Sinclair, both of whom did work for the Harris government but came away disillusioned from the experience.

In any event, in our party system the leader, not the members, ultimately determines what policy positions to take and what planks to include in the platform. And John Tory is very much a hands-on leader who cares about policy. He vetted all the white papers, and they very much reflect his thinking. An early draft of the paper on rural affairs, for example, included some intemperate Toronto-bashing. It was gone in the final version. So even if Tory does get a lot of right-wing feedback at the weekend conference, don't expect to find it in the party platform next year.