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‘Bryan Evans and Carlo Fanelli (Editors), Against the People: How Ford Nation Is Dismantling Ontario’

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Bryan Evans and Carlo Fanelli (Editors), *Against the People: How Ford Nation is Dismantling Ontario* (Fernwood Publishing, 2025), 282pp. Paperback. C\$28. ISBN: 978-1-7736-3724-2.

The politics of Ontario in Canada (population 16.1 million in 2024) have, for over a hundred years, featured a strong Left. Though it has only governed twice since 1919, first disguised as a coalition of the United Farmers of Ontario-Independent Labour Party (1919-23), and, from 1990 to 1995 as the New Democratic Party (NDP), it has always enjoyed substantial support electorally and intellectually. I point this out to explain where this book sits in the political culture of the province.

As this volume came to public light, Doug Ford, the Ontario Premier and leader of the Progressive Conservative Party (PCP), launched a snap election campaign on 24 January 2025. The timing could not be better for Leftists to take stock of a Progressive Conservative government that was first elected in 2018 (and re-elected in 2022).

Against the People covers an admirable range of issues and unabashedly takes issue with everything Doug Ford does, but it is not campaign literature nor is it an academic volume. It's 22 authors include some academics but most of the contributors hail from the more activist side of the Left: union organizers and NGO militants who bring their own intellectual habits to bear: literature reviews were not included and many of the essays are quite personal (which is not a detriment).

Well written and put together as it may be, this was not a book likely to be found on Premier Doug Ford's touring bus as each chapter hurled a carefully targeted stone at the PCP government's windshield. Evans and Fanelli open the book by pointing out that the Ford Conservative government (the entire volume deliberately avoids invoking the 'progressive' in the governing party's name) is 'the latest iteration of the province's decades-long trajectory of neoliberal restructuring' whose origins would date back to the mid-1970s.

It is fair to say that Ford has mocked the Left on its own terrain, bragging that his brand of conservatism acts on behalf of 'the people' and 'blue-collar workers' of the province. Prone to numerous scandals involving developers and questionable policies, Ford has proven to be a very able politician. He has learned to apologize for his many lapses of judgment and that tactic yielded gold in 2022 as the NDP lost almost ten percentage points in voting percentage on their 2018 results and took less than a third of the seats on less than 25 percent of the vote—the same number as the Centre-Left Liberal Party.

Though he does not win any personality popularity contests, Ford and his party are undefeated as they were handily re-elected on 27 February 2025 with 43 percent of the vote, an increase of two percentage points, and one more seat in the legislature. The NDP lost a seat, and over five percentage points from the 2022 result, but will remain the Official Opposition even though it barely earned half the votes of the Liberal Party. The voters clearly did not read this book. In fact, only a minority decided to even vote: for the second time in three years, participation was around 45 percent.

One will not also read in this book that the NDP is grossly overrepresented in the Ontario Legislature as a result of the first-past-the-post electoral system, but its contents are fired up with indignation at how unfair this province has become. Chapters on justice, universities, schools, corruption, health care, childcare, urban and municipal

affairs, parliamentary procedures, and Indigenous affairs dissect the Ford agenda with aplomb. Each makes a convincing case of the damage it has caused as the urgent problems Ford promised to address have only gotten worse. Routine health care provided by a general practitioner is a dream for fifteen percent of the population. Housing is at once crushingly expensive (four in ten adults devote more than thirty percent of their income to housing) and rare. Food banks have mushroomed across the province and fed hundreds of thousands of families. The opportunities for cultural development have been slashed. Investments in transportation infrastructure have continued, but funding for public transit has been slow. An 18km 'cross town' tramway system in Toronto has been stalled for over a decade, but the provincial crown corporation and its political masters remain unaccountable for this utter failure. Justice in Ontario is delayed endlessly and routinely denied. The postsecondary sector remains massively underfunded and aimless as the province has abandoned its leadership in setting priorities and preventing a ruinous and expensive duplication.

And yet, Ontario is prosperous. Its C\$1 trillion economy puts it on par with the Netherlands and Turkey. That said, the government of Ontario's budget shows deep signs of mismanagement. In its final year, the Liberal government (2017-18) spent C\$154.3 billion on program expenditures (not counting the interest on the debt). The Ford government's expenditures in 2018-19 were C\$161.1 billion and reached C\$195.2 billion in 2024, an increase of 26.5 percent.

That growth, however, is fuelled by borrowed money. While its revenues continue to climb, Ontario debt now stands at C\$437.6 billion, a 17.7 percent increase since 2019. Its net-debt-to-GDP ratio has hovered around the 39 percent mark for many years. In comparison, the State of California (population 39.5 million; more than twice the size of Ontario's) ended its 2023-24 fiscal year with US\$158 billion in state debt and US\$454 billion in local debt. Ontario's population size puts it between New York State (population 20.2 million) and Pennsylvania (population 13 million). New York's total debt stands at US\$63.9 billion while Pennsylvania's stands at nearly US\$63 billion. Of course, the American states hardly pay for the health care of their citizens.

Evans, Fanelli and their contributors make a compelling case that Ontario is a sick jurisdiction, and that the solution is better funding, most likely through more, and fairer, taxation. That is a message neither the government nor the voters want to hear. People go hungry and without health care or effective courts in a province that boasts remarkable wealth but that is clearly unable to manage itself. Perhaps this book will have far more influence in the coming years.

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