

Avoiding Blame?
A Discussion of the Strategic Politics of the Harris Conservatives in Ontario

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Introduction

In June 1995 the Progressive Conservative party under the leadership of Michael (Mike) Harris was elected to power in Ontario. One of the prominent themes of the Harris Conservatives' policy agenda was a desire to implement deep cutbacks to government spending, totalling roughly \$6 billion. Once in power the Tories were quick off the mark as the promised cutbacks were enacted in two waves of retrenchment. The first round was announced in July 1995 and the second round in November 1995. The Tories' retrenchment initiatives cut across a huge swath of public policy and impacted on virtually every policy sector of the province. Once these cutbacks were secured, the Tories cut an estimated \$6 to \$8 billion from the provincial expenditure budget, representing 10 percent of the provincial budget. Despite imposing such heavy austerity measures the Harris government was able to maintain quite strong approval ratings, as did Mike Harris in his performance as premier (Angus Reid 1996). Under the circumstances, maintaining such strong approval ratings represented a remarkable political feat, as securing expenditure retrenchment of the scope and scale of the Harris government is assumed to carry significant political costs. The emerging conventional wisdom in comparative and Canadian politics is that the Harris government's political success can be attributed to their successful use of blame avoidance strategies, which would have lowered the political costs of retrenchment to a manageable level.

The purpose of this paper is to test the applicability of blame avoidance to the strategic politics of the Harris government in Ontario, specifically toward their efforts to impose austerity measures in late 1995 and retrench government spending. The argument that will be developed in this paper is that contrary to theoretical expectations, blame avoidance does not provide a compelling explanation for the Harris Tories' political success. Instead, we need to look elsewhere for an explanation. First will be a discussion of the theoretical expectations about the strategic politics of imposing losses. Second will be a discussion of the research findings. Lastly will be an analysis of the implications of these findings.

Theoretical Expectations about Imposing Austerity Measures

In general, it is assumed that politicians want to claim credit and be rewarded for good news and avoid being blamed and punished for bad news. Retrenchment (imposing austerity measures) is usually understood as being a highly undesirable form of political bad news because they involve reducing benefits to people (voters) through cutbacks to benefit rates, tightening eligibility requirements or cancelling services and/or increasing burdens on people by imposing new or raising existing taxes, user fees other forms of government levies (Pierson 1994, 1996).

Politicians' desire to avoid blame can be best understood as a set of interlocking attitudes and motives. There are five such attitudes and motives that can be ascribed to the politics of blame avoidance. First, politicians are expected to be highly averse to risking their electoral ambitions. Second, when confronted about their policy preferences (i.e. when faced with a blame generating situation) politicians can be expected to retreat. Third, politicians seeking to avoid blame will be suspicious about exercising political leadership and policy discretion. Fourth, blame avoiders will seek to minimize imposing concentrated losses, even if it means giving up greater benefits. Lastly, when forced to

impose losses, blame avoiders will use a variety of techniques in an effort to conceal what they are doing, obscure their accountability for what they are doing or reduce the impact of what they are doing.

To elaborate on this last point, there are several commonly identified techniques that are associated with politicians seeking to avoid blame (Pal and Weaver 2003). There are a variety of ways that governments can try to manipulate policy procedures to lower the visibility of loss-imposing actions. First, they can try to insulate themselves from loss-imposing actions by delegating decision-making power to another body that is less sensitive to blame-generating pressures, such as the courts or independent commissions. Secondly, governments can also try “passing the buck” by delegating detailed decision-making power to another body but constrain its options so that it will have to impose losses while shouldering the blame for doing so, such as downloading to other levels of government. Lastly, governments can also focus on agenda limitation: keep loss-imposing actions from being taken openly so as to limit blame-generating activity by opponents. The use of budget and/or omnibus legislation is an example of such a tactic.

The second broad set of strategies open to governments is to manipulate perceptions to obscure political culpability of loss-imposing actions. Within this set of strategies is obfuscation: use technical changes or other mechanisms to lower the visibility of loss-imposing actions. Examples of this technique include the use of de-indexation of indexed programs so that inflation imposes cuts rather than the government. Governments can also try to finding a scapegoat and blame loss-imposing action on another actor to make it seem inevitable and/or necessary. The courts and previous governments are usually used as scapegoats. Circle the Wagons: achieve a consensus among all major policymakers before a loss-imposing initiative is announced, to make it seem inevitable and necessary. If federal-provincial agreements can be reached it can be used to either spread or diffuse blame. Redefining the Issue: portray loss-imposing action in a new way that mobilizes either previously un-mobilized beneficiaries and/or those with no direct stake in the action.

The last thing a government can do to avoid blame is to manipulating payoffs to minimize the impact of losses that are imposed. For example there is: dispersion (keeping levels of losses low and broad enough to disperse over a long time period, so that opposition lacks incentives to mobilize); compensation (provide sufficient compensation to specific categories of potential losers so as to mitigate or dispel their opposition); exemption (exempt enough specific categories of opponents of loss-imposing action to split and weaken opposition coalition); and, concentration (impose losses on groups that are politically weakest or viewed least sympathetically by others and, thus, unlikely to build a broad coalition against austerity measures).

The experience of the Harris government in Ontario is a useful case because the Conservatives’ austerity measures were intended to engineer a redistributive transfer of resources to taxpayers from the beneficiaries of public sector programs and employment. Securing such a transfer required the Harris government to impose concentrated losses on specific groups in return for relatively diffused benefits for others. Such a political circumstance is a textbook case for the use of blame avoidance strategies (Weaver 1986, 379). Therefore, if ever there was a government that could have been expected to use blame avoidance techniques, it would be the Harris government. Indeed, much of the strategic behaviour of the Harris Conservatives could be interpreted as being driven by a

desire to avoid blame, in the sense that they made use of virtually every one of the strategies and tactics described above. A discussion of the use of blame avoidance as an explanation for the political success of the Harris government is where we now turn.

Blame Avoidance as a Political Explanation

This section will discuss the use of blame avoidance as an explanation for the Conservatives' political success. If the blame avoidance argument is correct, then Tory political and policy successes can be explained by the ability of the Harris government to hide what they were doing from the public. The Harris Conservatives' strategic behaviour consisted of a variety of actions that could easily be inferred as blame avoiding activity because they aggressively manipulated policy procedures, perceptions and payoffs. Each of these features of Tory behaviour will be discussed in turn.

Manipulation of Procedures

The Harris Conservatives extensively manipulated policy procedures to secure their cutbacks. The first example of this type of manipulation is to consider the mechanisms used by the Conservatives to secure their cutbacks. In the July Statement, the Harris government relied on the use of regulations that could be changed by executive orders. This meant that the cutbacks did not have to be vetted by the legislature. This, arguably, was a way to reduce public scrutiny of the Conservatives' spending cuts, which is consistent with blame avoidance.

To secure the cutbacks flowing from the November Statement, the Conservatives' used an omnibus piece of budget legislation, Bill 26 (the Savings and Restructuring Act). This can also be understood as an effort in blame avoidance. The logic behind the legislation was to bundle all of the regulatory changes needed by the Harris Conservatives to impose their cutbacks into one piece of legislation rather than passing multiple pieces of legislation for each area of spending that was targeted. This would not only accelerate the ability of the Tories to impose the cutbacks, it would also presumably reduce the aggregate political fallout over time. Thus, the omnibus legislation can be understood as a textbook case of the use of agenda limitation techniques.

It is also necessary to explore who were forced to actually secure the cutbacks. One area that was targeted for significant cutbacks by the government was provincial transfers to its "transfer partners," specifically municipal governments, universities and colleges, school boards and hospitals. This is colloquially referred to as the MUSH sector. As was outlined in the last chapter, the Harris government imposed heavy cutbacks to municipalities, universities, schools and universities. However, while the government itself was responsible for implementing the cuts, the transfer partners themselves were required to actually make the decisions that would affect services. Thus, if there were reductions in local services, it could be assumed that the municipal government would be blamed, not the province. Therefore, it is arguable that the Harris government prioritized reductions in transfers as an austerity measure because it would help them diffuse blame for reductions in sensitive services to the public.

Also along this line of thinking, the Conservatives created the Health Services Restructuring Commission, which was responsible for facilitating the imposing cutbacks and restructuring of the province's hospitals. Arguably the use of the Commission was intended to insulate the government from blame generating pressures. This argument is

advanced by John Ibbitson in his account behind the political logic behind the creation of the Commission:

When Frank Miller, as Health minister, tried to close a few hospitals in the 1970s, the protests forced him to abandon the scheme and probably contributed to a heart attack he suffered. The NDP, under Rae, had asked district health councils to come up with plans for restructuring, but they had been given a leisurely timetable, so as not to interfere with Rae's hoped-for re-election. The Tories wanted to speed up the process, but Health Minister Jim Wilson wasn't eager to repeat the immolation of Frank Miller. Instead, the Tories decided to hand the problem over to an independent commission, which would have absolute power to choose which hospitals closed, and which would work to a strict timetable. The commission was there to save more than the just the Health minister's skin. The premier's advisors also wanted to distance Harris as much as possible from the closure decisions, especially since he had suggested during one campaign appearance that the Tories had no plans for closing hospitals (Ibbitson 134).

Thus, in terms of who was responsible for actually reducing the level of public services to the public, it is arguable that the Harris government made extensive use of both "passing the buck" and "insulation" tactics.

Manipulation of Payoffs

A second type of blame avoidance technique that can be used by governments is to manipulate policy payoffs in an effort to obscure the effects of painful reforms. When one evaluates the patterns of policy losses and gains imposed by the Harris government it is evident that they were not distributed evenly, which suggests that they sought to manipulate policy payoffs to target populations. First, with respect to the timing of their cutbacks, the Conservatives announced all of their major austerity measures within the first six months of assuming office. However, the cutbacks they announced were to take effect over three fiscal years. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that the Conservatives were trying to disperse the effects of their cutbacks over time.

It is also arguable that the Harris government sought to compensate the public to diffuse some of the political effects of their austerity measures. The central plank of the Common Sense Revolution was to engineer a 30 percent cut to provincial income tax rates. Strategically, it would appear that the Tories were hoping to dispel or mitigate public reactions against their cost containment initiatives.

The Harris Conservatives also manipulated the effects of cutbacks within specific policy areas as well. For example, reductions in social assistance programs and benefits were the single largest item in the July Statement, amounting to 500 million of the total 1.9 billion in reductions. When the Conservatives retrenched welfare benefits, they exempted seniors and the disabled from the reduction in benefit rates. It is also arguable that the Tories concentrated their largest cutbacks on groups that might have been perceived as undeserving, again, as in the case of welfare rate reductions but also exempting those groups that might be viewed more sympathetically by the public.

Manipulation of Perceptions

The Conservatives' also engaged in significant efforts to define policy problems in such a way as to manipulate public perceptions as well. First, the Conservatives' public statements invoked a fiscal crisis to provide a rationale for their cutbacks. For example, in his comments on the situation, Premier Harris argued that "the fiscal situation is not good. In fact it is critical." The crisis was reiterated by Finance Minister Ernie Eves in his Statement, when he argued that "the former government left the province with a spending crisis which is just that: a spending crisis." In terms of problem definition, a crisis is a specific type of circumstance that requires immediate and extraordinary remedial action (Rochefort and Cobb 1994, 21-22). Thus, the Conservatives were seeking to use the rhetoric of calamity to make their aggressive expenditure reductions seem reasonable and appropriate responses to the problem.

Another technique in problem definition is to attribute causality about the origins of the policy problem under consideration. Deborah Stone (1995) suggests that policy-makers develop "causal stories" as a way to frame their decisions in a narrative to help the public make sense of the situation, and to make the proposed solutions seem like the only logical course of action. As is suggested from the comments quoted from Harris and Eves, the Conservatives' developed a causal story about the deficit and debt that blamed the previous NDP government is responsible for the dire fiscal situation. From a blame avoidance perspective, it can be argued that the Conservatives were using the NDP as a scapegoat to make their cutbacks seem either inevitable and/or necessary measures to correct the irresponsible behaviour of the previous government.

It is also arguable that the Conservatives' invoked a policy mandate to articulate a type of 'circling the wagons' by using the 1995 election result as evidence of a policy consensus that existed between the public and the Ontario Conservatives about the proper solution to the fiscal problems facing the province. Such a tactic is evident from the interpretations of both the media and the Harris Conservatives regarding the mandate that was conferred on June 8, 1995.

Lastly, as a general observation, the Conservatives also redefined the issue – by linking the austerity measures to their overall plan for economic and job growth in the province and by arguing that spending cuts were necessary to help the government focus on the public's priorities.

To clarify the specific tactics used by the Conservatives, below is a catalogue of what appear to be their use of blame avoidance techniques:

- Insulation by creating the Health Services Restructuring Commission as the mechanism to close, merge and amalgamate hospitals.
- Passing the Buck by downloading spending cuts to municipal governments, school boards, colleges and universities
- Agenda limitation through the use of executive orders and omnibus budget legislation
- Finding a scapegoat with the previous NDP government
- Circling the wagons by invoking a policy consensus between the public and the government
- Redefining the issue by linking austerity measures to economic renewal of the province
- Dispersion of cutbacks over time to try to stall counter-mobilization efforts

- Compensation to taxpayers in the form of large tax cuts
- Exemption of specific categories of groups from loss-imposing actions to try to split and weaken opposition
- Concentration of specific cutbacks on groups that are viewed the least sympathetically by the public (welfare recipients, politicians, the public sector) to try to stall a broad coalition opposed to the government's agenda

Based on the preceding discussion of strategic behaviour, it seems reasonable to infer that the Harris Tories were a textbook case in the use of blame avoidance techniques. However, to categorize the Harris government as 'blame avoiders' would be a misnomer for two reasons. First, the Conservatives' were constantly being confronted with large-scale protests and demonstrations, which means that they were somewhat unsuccessful at *actually* avoiding blame. Secondly, the underlying motives behind the Conservatives actions were inconsistent with avoiding blame and in some instances are more in line with credit claiming.

Blame Generating Situations and the Harris Agenda

The Harris government was constantly confronted with blame generating situations, usually in the form of large-scale protests and demonstrations. The following list provides a catalogue of the major demonstrations and/or blame generating situations that emerged in response to the Conservatives' retrenchment agenda during their first year in office:

- September 27, 1995: 5,000 demonstrate at opening of the 1st session of the 35th legislative assembly of Ontario
- November 1995: daycare workers stage one-day walkout to protest cutbacks
- December 6, 1995: Opposition MPPs disrupt and stall the operation of the OLA to force the government to hold public hearings on Bill 26, the Savings and Restructuring Act
- December 11, 1995: between 10,000 and 15,000 protesters participate in the London "Day of Action"
- February 1996: students protest cutbacks to post-secondary education and disrupt the OLA
- February 23, 1996: an estimated 30,000 protesters participate in the first Hamilton "Day of Action"
- February 24, 1996: an estimated 120,000 protesters participate in the second Hamilton "Day of Action"
- February 26, 1996: approximately 50,000 Ontario Public Service Employee Union (OPSEU) workers begin a six week strike to resist the Harris government's proposals to downsize the OPS by 13,000 positions
- February 1996: public sector unions (power workers, LCBO and teachers' unions) launch advertising campaigns to try to mobilize the mass public against proposals to privatize crown corporations
- April 19, 1996: an estimated 30,000 protesters participate in Waterloo Region "Day of Action"
- June 24, 1996: an estimated 10,000 protesters participate in Peterborough "Day of Action"

The presence of such large-scale and widespread protest activities suggest that, if the Tories were seeking to avoid blame for their decisions, the strategy was completely ineffective. The presence of 5,000 protesters demonstrating outside Queen's Park and some scuffling with police in the lobby of the legislative precinct during the Conservatives' inaugural *Speech from the Throne* suggests that if the government were trying to use regulations as a way to conceal the losses it imposed, thereby avoiding a blame generating situation, it simply did not work. Similarly, the actions of the opposition parties during legislative debate and consideration of Bill 26, the *Savings and Restructuring Act* make the claim of successful blame avoidance difficult to sustain as well.

As was stated earlier, Bill 26 was an omnibus piece of enabling legislation introduced by the Harris government to empower the cabinet with the necessary regulatory powers to impose the cutbacks announced in the November *Economic and Fiscal Statement*. The initial plan of the government was to pass the legislation without public hearings. In response to this, the opposition parties refused to adhere to parliamentary procedure and forced the operation of the legislative assembly to come to a halt until the government agreed to hold public hearings. The government relented and agreed to have hearings. However, the opposition tactics raised the salience of Bill 26 and if the Conservatives' were hoping to pass the legislation with minimal public visibility, their plan was unsuccessful, as opinion polls indicate that at the time a large majority of Ontarians (75%) were aware of the legislation (Environics: Focus Ontario FO954: Q16). Just as a corollary to these observations, polls indicate as well that roughly 70 percent of Ontarians either somewhat or strongly disapproved of the legislation (Environics: Focus Ontario FO954: Q17). These observations suggest that if the Conservatives were indeed seeking to avoid blame, they were simply unsuccessful at doing so.

Reactions to Blame Generating Situations

Rather than retreat in the face of widespread opposition, the Harris government tended to push forward with its cutbacks and deployed what Ross and Cobb (1997) refer to as "attack" strategies against their opponents.¹ Attack strategies are a form of agenda denial technique that governments can use to try to discredit and marginalize their opponents. These can manifest themselves in a variety of ways but the two most common types of attack strategies are to try to discredit the group advocating an issue by linking the group with other unpopular groups, questioning the ethics and behaviour of group leaders, blaming the group for the problem and/or using deception and releasing false information. Likewise, it is also possible for a government to try to discredit the issue that the group or groups are advocating. For example, governments can claim that the problem is not a legitimate public concern, dispute the facts of the case, claim that

¹ Ross and Cobb argue that there are four levels of strategic choice that can be used to deny agenda access and contain issues. These strategies are differentiated by the level of resources deployed in them and the amount of risk involved in using them. The first are referred to as low-cost strategies, such as simply ignoring a problem. Second are mid-level strategies designed to symbolically placate the groups advocating the issue, such as creating a commission. Third, are mid-level attack strategies that are discussed above. Fourth, are high risk strategies that involve open coercion/violence and/or the use of legal, economic or political sanctions against the groups.

concerns are isolated incidents and/or try to raise fears of the general public about the possible effects of dealing with the issue.

The legitimacy and status of the group advocating the issue seems to be a crucial variable in the strategic calculus as to which approach a government might try to use. For example, if the legitimacy of the group is low then it is easier to try to discredit the group itself, while it is more sensible to try to discredit the issue when the group's legitimacy is high.

When responding to protests, the Harris government focused its attack strategy on trying to discredit and marginalize the groups that were opposed to its retrenchment agenda. The techniques used by the Harris government to achieve this can be illustrated by briefly examining how governmental responses to large protests were presented in the media. For example, in a story from *The Globe and Mail* about the reactions to the Conservatives' Speech from the Throne, Mike Harris was depicted as being "unruffled" by protests and demonstrations and questioned the partisan motivations of those protesting:

Unruffled Premier Mike Harris said he expected protests from those affected by cuts to government services and by deregulation.

In brief remarks to reporters after the speech, Mr. Harris accused the demonstrators, mainly social activists and trade unionists, of being partisans of previous governments. He said he had an electoral mandate to undo the work of those administrations.

"They're the people, I guess, who like the status quo, who liked the government of the last 10 years of big spending. We, quite frankly, believe we were elected to change that" (Mittelstadt, A1).

The politics of public opinion was echoed by Harris in another story by *The Globe and Mail*, suggesting why the government refused to "cave in under pressure." While Harris recognized that the short-term effect of such actions would be to weaken the popularity of his government, in the longer-term Harris argued that he was elected to represent other segments of the public, those who did not "shout demands outside the Legislature, but those who will pay their taxes, who raise their families, who love their communities, who obey the laws....the people who have been so long ignored at Queen's Park" (Rusk A3 October 23, 1995).

The Conservatives' attack strategy was continued in response to the Days of Action. For example, in response to the London Day of Action Harris argued that the organizers of the event were not acting in the public interest:

In Toronto, Mr. Harris said strike leaders and supporters were not acting in the best interests of the province and had taken the idea of protest too far.

"I understand labour trying to press every advantage they can," he told reporters. "I understand that process."

"But I think you go too far when if you engage in activity that actually affects people and the effectiveness and competitiveness of the province" (Rusk A3 December 12, 1995).

The implications of Harris's comments were that the protests were selfish and were more concerned with sustaining their own privileges and benefits, at the expense of the public interest.

The Hamilton Day of Action was an interesting case because the protests coincided with a policy conference being held by the Ontario Conservatives in the city at the same time. As was suggested above, the estimates for the size of the protests were approximately 30,000 on the first day and somewhere upwards of 100,000, perhaps as many as 120,000 on the second day of protest in Hamilton. It was the largest protest against the Harris government's retrenchment agenda to date.

Conservative reactions to the Hamilton Days of Action echoed their earlier efforts. Stories about Tory reactions in *The Hamilton Spectator* illustrate this point in some detail. For example, an article titled "Protest Crowd won't stop us Harris tells Tory faithful" focuses on how Premier Harris views protests in what was referred to as a "taunting" speech:

Tories dismissed the tens of thousands of protesters in Hamilton on the weekend, saying they don't speak for the average Ontario resident.

In a taunting speech to the party's annual policy conference at the Hamilton Convention Centre, Mr. Harris said protesters are wasting their time and breathe protesting against his cost-cutting government.

"No special interest group or lobby will stop us," he told 1,100 party faithful attending a dinner Saturday. They jumped to their feet and cheered...

"Praising police and condemning the protesters and the media, Mr. Harris said: "No union-led demonstration will deter us. And no editorial in *The Hamilton Spectator* or *The Toronto Star* will dissuade us from our course."

Mr. Harris said that at the end of the day his government will be judged not by the number of protests, but "on whether we...have created real, lasting jobs."

Thus, in general, governmental officials sought to discredit and marginalize the groups protesting against the government by first referring to them as "special interests" thereby questioning the motives of protesters. Secondly officials argued that they were partisans of the previous NDP and Liberal governments and, as a result, that they were not interested in the public interest. The extension of this point is that the groups protesting were behaving in a selfish manner because they were trying to protect their privileges at the expense of the public. This was evident in Harris's remarks regarding the need for "common solutions" and not protests. In addition, governmental officials argued that as a result protests and/or demonstrations were not an expression of "real" public opinion. Therefore the government argued that it had a responsibility to ignore such protests and continue with its agenda.

The point being advanced here is that the belligerent attack posture that the Harris government articulated toward its opponents is not characteristic of a government seeking to avoid blame for its decisions. The Harris government seemed almost gleeful when dismissing and attacking protests. This is the first clue that the Harris government was seeking to do something other than avoid blame as the basis of its retrenchment strategy.

Strategic Motives of the Harris Government

Even though the Harris government used a variety of techniques that look like blame avoidance on the surface, further analysis suggests that the underlying motives guiding the Tories' behaviour was inconsistent with blame avoidance and even, at times, seems to be more in line with credit claiming. Specifically, the Conservatives tended to increase the visibility of their austerity measures and they also demonstrated favourable attitudes toward exercising leadership and discretion.

The Visibility of Austerity Measures

Rather than try to conceal what their policy intentions were, the Harris Conservatives actually tried to increase the visibility of their preferences to impose losses. This is evident by the manner in which the Tories' openly emphasized the need for deep expenditure retrenchment in Ontario. For example, the second core plank in the *Common Sense Revolution* was called "Less Government Spending" and the Conservatives' pledged that:

Over a three year period beginning immediately after the election, total spending, except for health care, will be cut by 20% - twenty cents on the dollar. Law enforcement and classroom funding for education will also be exempt.

On our current estimates for 1996 revenues and expenses, non-priority spending will be reduced by \$3.605 billion in the first year. At the end of three years, this plan will have reduced annual government spending by \$6 billion (7).

The next seven pages in the CSR are then devoted to explaining the various areas that will be cut by a Conservative government. This is important because the CSR is a 21 page document and a full seven pages are used to detail the Conservatives' plans for retrenching government spending, which involved: cutting the public sector; welfare restructuring; education restructuring; eliminating job training programs and business subsidies; reducing the province's capital budget; privatizing public housing and cutting legal aid. If the Conservatives were planning to avoid blame for their cost containment measures it seems highly unlikely that they would present their intentions to openly. Instead, it is likely that they would not have discussed the options at all, or would have been vague and generalized in their language.

The visibility of painful policies in the CSR speaks to the larger issue about the nature and logic of the Conservatives' electoral strategy in the 1995 campaign. The logic of the Tories' election strategy demonstrated that they were not averse to taking risks as the entire strategy was based to a large degree on taking calculated political risks. The first risk was the content of the policies in the CSR. By Ontario standards, the policies articulated in the CSR were unconventionally right-wing, to the point that political commentators at the time predicted that the Harris Tories were too far out of step with the moderate and centrist nature of the Ontario political culture to be successful. Secondly, the CSR was released on May 3, 1994, what turned out to be a full year ahead of the election call. At the time, the Conservatives were the third party in the Ontario

Legislature and were far behind the Liberals in opinion polls. So, in a sense the party had nothing to lose politically, so it was unnecessary to be risk averse. This laid the foundations for an aggressive election strategy.

Public opinion research conducted by the party demonstrated that, despite the Liberals' lead, the party had a significant amount of latent - or potential - support among soft Liberal supporters. Thus, the Conservatives devised a strategy that was intended to (a) reinforce their own base of existing support and (b) persuade soft Liberal voters to switch their voting intentions to the Conservative party (see Woolstencroft 1997). The strategy relied on polarization through the extensive use of wedge issues, such as workfare and quotas discussed briefly above, as a way for the Conservatives to differentiate themselves from the Liberals (Williams 1997, MacDermid and Albo 2001). The Conservatives' focused their television advertising during the 1995 election campaign on the need for painful policies. For example, in the early stages of the campaign the Conservatives heavily relied on an ad referred to as "Welfare/Quotas" that openly discussed the Tories' desire to impose losses through (1) the implement a work-for-welfare program and (2) by repealing the NDP's employment equity legislation, which the Conservatives' labelled as unfair job quotas (MacDermid 1997, 100-101). Again, if the Conservatives' were seeking to avoid blame for these painful and what would be expected to be unpopular policies, it is unlikely that they would have used them as the basis for television advertising in an effort to woo voters.

The basic point being advanced here is that the strategy behaviour of the Harris Conservatives suggests that their intention to increase the visibility of austerity measures demonstrates that they were not averse to taking political risks. In addition, increased visibility also suggests that they were not averse to imposing concentrated losses. both of these attitudes are inconsistent with a government that was choosing to avoid blame for its decisions.

Leadership and Discretion

In public statements about their broad retrenchment agenda both Mike Harris and his Finance Minister demonstrated favourable attitudes toward political leadership and policy discretion. This point can be demonstrated by illustrating how the Harris government talked about enacting their policy preferences and the role that choices played in their policy deliberations. Table 1 (below) provides a summary of Harris's statements and table 2 (below) summarizes Eves' statements.

Table 1: Statements by Premier Mike Harris

This province has been on the wrong track and it's time to do something about it.

What I want to do today is underscore that we got the message on June the 8th. The people of this province didn't send us here to wring our hands.

Voters elected us to change the status quo, to put our problems behind us and get Ontario moving again. We asked for that job, we were given that job and we accept that responsibility.

The easy thing for a new government such as mine to do is to point to the mess we've inherited; to spend all our time for the first year pointing fingers and laying blame.

None of our decisions are easy or taken lightly.

Table: Statements by Finance Minister Ernie Eves

Today, my colleagues and I, under Premier Harris' leadership, are taking major steps to bring Ontario's spending under control.

Today we are taking swift and decisive action to cut government spending immediately.

The bottom line is that, if we do not act immediately, the Province's deficit this year will be \$10.6 billion. This is unacceptable.

We are taking swift and decisive action to bring spending under control.

The reason for this, in my opinion, is that the former government did not take the tough decisions to keep spending under control.

We are taking immediate action.

There is more to do. There will be tough choices and difficult decisions to face. With the measures I am announcing today, it is clear that our Government is prepared to face them.

The statements by Harris and Eves suggest that they were willing to implement their own policy preferences and that they exercised significant discretion about making decisions in the policy process. Demonstrating such favourable attitudes toward leadership and discretion are antithetical to politicians seeking to avoid blame and are in line with those seeking to claim credit for decisions.

All of these points taken together seem to suggest that, in general, the Harris Tories were not averse to taking risks. With this underlying set of attitudes and

motivations, it seems somewhat difficult that they were guided by a desire to avoid blame for the reforms they were imposing. Instead, it seems that they were guided by a desire to create credit claiming opportunities for themselves through their cutbacks.

Discussion: Strategies and Tactics

The findings of this paper support earlier arguments about the difficulties associated with avoiding blame in Westminster systems. While the empirical findings from Harris Ontario are not generalizable, these results do raise some analytical and theoretical questions about the actual effectiveness of avoiding blame as a strategic objective in the Canadian political context. The point behind successfully avoiding blame for unpopular decisions is to disrupt or cloud the lines of accountability by making the causal chains between the decisions made by policy-makers and the outcomes of those decisions less traceable. The problem the Harris government needed to confront was that as a majority government operating at the provincial level in the Canadian variant of the Westminster system, all decisions are easily traced back to the government.

It is recognized in existing research on these questions that governments operating in parliamentary systems find it more difficult to avoid blame generating situations than those in presidential systems. This is particularly so in Canada, as it is well known that Canada's Westminster based parliamentary system is based on rigid party discipline that concentrates decision-making authority in the hands of the cabinet and arguably the first minister (Savoie 1999). Concentration of authority was significantly amplified in the Harris cabinet system (Glenn 2005). Increased authority translates into increased accountability as well. This is because the logic of politics within parliamentary systems is actually intended to increase the traceability of policy and political decisions by institutionalizing blame generating situations, by organizing the business of government as a competitive contest for advantage between the government and opposition and providing highly publicized and regular venues for holding the government accountable, such as Question Period.

These observations were raised by Weaver in his initial formulation of the blame avoidance framework when he discussed the use of blame avoidance as a tool for comparative political and policy analysis. Blame avoidance was formulated within the distinct and perhaps exceptional institutional matrix of American politics and has some problems being applied in other contexts. As Weaver argues:

Parliamentary government also makes it particularly difficult for these governments to dodge blame for losses they have imposed or acquiesced in, because it concentrates authority and accountability in the government-of-the-day and provides regular opportunities to hold government accountable. There is no one to whom the buck can be passed and, in most cases, it is transparently obvious that government could have intervened to prevent the loss, especially in micro-level changes such as a coal mine closure in Wales or rail line abandonment in Western Canada. Governments in parliamentary systems are thus likely to face very strong pressures to 'throw good money after bad' to prop up failed policies. Officials in the executive cannot use the legislature as a scapegoat (and visa versa) as in the United States. In theory, ministers who are responsible for failed policies can resign as scapegoats, but

this usually occurs only in the case of scandal rather than failed policies. The principle of collective cabinet responsibility assures that the government as a whole will share any blame for failed policies (Weaver 1986, 392).

The largest problem is to what degree can blame avoidance techniques actually be pursued as a credible objective on the Canadian political context? The argument being advanced here is that it seems likely that governments would focus their attention on trying to manipulate public perceptions about policy decisions. Within the context of highly concentrated authority and accountability, decisions are, as Weaver suggests, easily traceable and thus it is “transparently obvious” what the government is doing. Hence, the manipulation of policy procedures and payoffs are likely to be ineffective at avoiding blame. However, if a government can manipulate public perceptions - and by extension public opinion - about what they doing and why, then it seems credible to suggest that the government would have some strategic room for manoeuvre.

The second point relates to what seems to be a level of analysis problem, specifically with respect to the differentiating between what might be useful political tactics as opposed to strategies. Strategies are used to secure long-term macro-political goals (i.e. the proverbial political war); tactics are useful in securing an advantage in micro-level policy battles. Blame avoidance might be compelling as an explanation for tactical deployments pertaining to certain controversial or unpopular micro-level policy issues; not as an explanation of broad political strategy. In other words, blame avoidance can be useful in helping understand motives in a pitched political battle over engineering hospital closures but is less useful in helping us understand how a government will try to win the political war, in the sense of securing its broader policy goals and winning re-election.

The goal of blame avoidance is to conceal what has been done or to minimize the impact of decisions. This is a way to avoid accountability for potentially unpopular actions. While this might make tactical sense, it seems like an empty approach for sculpting a political strategy to try to attract voters to support a broader governmental agenda. More research needs to be conducted to evaluate the interplay between blame avoidance and credit claiming (or other efforts at opinion mobilization) at different levels of government activity.

Summary

The Harris government was remarkably successful at imposing policy losses through retrenchment initiatives. They were successful in the sense that (a) they were able to implement their policy preferences (i.e. cutting spending) and (b) they were able to maintain strong approval ratings while doing so. Contrary to the expectations of the emerging conventional wisdom, the success of the Conservatives cannot be attributed to their use of blame avoidance techniques. Instead, the Harris Conservatives tended to demonstrate strong tendencies toward seeking to claim credit for the losses they imposed. The research findings of this study raise important questions about the strategic opportunities and constraints that exert pressure on governments in the Canadian political context, particularly at the provincial level. First, it is questionable to the degree to which blame avoidance is a viable political strategy. Second, it would be useful to conduct

more research on the possible role that other strategies, especially those that emphasize opinion mobilization behind loss-imposition would be a fruitful area of future research.

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