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The benign face of right-wing populism

Canada's Doug Ford is no xenophobe. But he still poses a threat to democratic government

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Is Canada a bastion against gathering global forces of right-wing populism?

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau thinks it is. 'At a time when the political movements exploit the real anxiety of their citizens, Canada has chosen to be against cynicism and embrace audacity and ambition,' he said in a recent address to the French National Assembly.

Piety aside, it's clear Trudeau believes Canada's special. He's not alone. Last year the New York Times published a piece entitled 'Canada's Secret to Resisting the West's Populist Wave' that highlighted the inclusive nature of Canadian national pride, and the untethered political loyalties of Canada's ethnic minority communities, which means all parties vie for their support.

But one man seems bent on ruining this festival of foreign envy and Canadian liberal smug self-satisfaction. His name is Doug Ford.

Readers may be more familiar with Ford's younger and now deceased brother, Rob, the former mayor of Toronto who admitted to smoking crack whilst in office. This did little to reduce his popularity among Torontonians, who bought into Rob's narrative that he took the side of ordinary people against the entrenched interests of the city's ruling class and the 'gravy train' running through Toronto's municipal politics.

Doug Ford is generally seen as a more stable and less coarse version of his brother — although The Globe and Mail newspaper reported that Ford was a drug dealer in the 1980s, which he denies.

A dynasty continues

Today, Ford is on the brink of leading Ontario, Canada's most populous and economically powerful province. He unexpectedly won the leadership of Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party earlier this year, after the party's leader was accused of sexual misconduct. Polls show him easily ahead of Premier Kathleen Wynne, whose Liberal Party has run Ontario for almost 15 years.

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Ford's platform includes familiar conservative policies such as cutting corporation and carbon taxes. However, his rhetoric echoes populist sentiment, with proclaimed support for the 'grassroots' and attacks on 'elites' from all political parties.

'I've got to define elites,' Ford said, when a radio host alluded to Ford's own personal wealth.

'People who look down on the average common folk, thinking they're smarter, thinking that they know better, to tell us how to live our lives, and when they have their little glass of champagne with their pinkies up in the air, looking down like we're better than you: those are the elites.'

Ford has accused Wynne of destroying the province and says her government is the most politically corrupt in Canadian history. Wynne, for her part, has likened Ford to the current US President.

'Doug Ford sounds like Donald Trump. And that's because he IS like Donald Trump,' she tweeted.

No xenophobe

Is she right? Is Ford a Canadian version of Trump — or, for that matter, of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, French National Front leader Marine Le Pen, or other right-wing populists around the world whose political fortunes appear to be on the rise? And if so, is the Canadian bastion crumbling?

Let's start with one reason, the crucial reason, why Ford is not comparable to Trump, or any of the others. Right-wing populist politicians around the world feed on ethnic and religious supremacism. They head up xenophobic movements based on fear and exclusion.

Ford, for reasons some of his critics tie themselves in knots to explain, is widely supported by ethnic minorities in Toronto and its suburbs. His rhetorical target — the champagne-drinking, pinkie finger-flaunting elites — may be as mythical as the 'threat' posed to Hungary's national identity by Syrian refugees that propelled Orban to victory in April, but they are not an enemy defined by race or religion.

Canada, even with its apparent appetite for populism, as demonstrated by Doug Ford's likely election victory, remains a stronghold of multicultural tolerance.

Canada did have a genuine race-baiter make a run for high political office. Kellie Leitch, in a bid to win the leadership of the federal Conservative Party, proposed screening all immigrants, visitors, and refugees to Canada for 'Canadians values.' She flamed out, finishing sixth in the race.

This is important, but it doesn't mean Ford's likely victory in Ontario doesn't have worrying implications for Canadian democracy. Populism, even of a relatively benign strand, can be damaging.

Anti-establishment

A good guide to this phenomenon is Harvard professor Steven Levitsky, author, with his colleague Daniel Ziblatt, of *How Democracies Die*.

Populists, he says, earn credibility with supporters by breaking established norms. These norms include tolerating political opponents and considering them legitimate. They also include forbearance – a reluctance to use all the tools legally at your disposal to crush your opponents and further your agenda, such as stacking courts or abusing executive orders.

However, if you've been elected with a mandate to bury the establishment, Levitsky said in a recent public lecture, you have little reason to act with forbearance once in office.

A second problem arising from populism is the polarisation that stems from demonising and de-legitimising your opponents.

'When an opponent's victory becomes intolerable, you start justifying extraordinary means to prevent it,' Levitsky added.

There are hints of this in Ford's rhetoric. He speaks in almost revolutionary tones, claiming he'll bring an end to a decades-long suppression of ordinary people. He's suggested Wynne would be in jail if she weren't in politics, and says other Liberals belong there too. Wynne's

public messaging has been neither restrained nor respectful, but she's no populist. She can't campaign against a political establishment she seems to embody.

Ford's rise, therefore, speaks to the potential appeal of conservative populism in Canada, but not to its often-attendant shadow of xenophobia.

It would be unwise to make too much of this latter point. Canadians are mostly proud of their country's ethnic diversity, and there has been widespread support for the acceptance of Syrian refugees fleeing that country's civil war. But it must also be said that the numbers that have come to Canada — some 40,000 since November 2015 — are quite small compared with the hundreds of thousands who have settled in Germany, bolstering xenophobic politics there.

Canada, even with its apparent appetite for populism, as demonstrated by Doug Ford's likely election victory, remains a stronghold of multicultural tolerance. But it hasn't really been tested.



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