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Doug Ford's political 'centrism'

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Ontario Premier Doug Ford's brand of conservatism fits within a longstanding tradition of Canadian Conservative populism, defined by a fervent commitment to market fundamentalism. Photo by Joey Coleman/Flickr

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Since Doug Ford assumed leadership of the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party, pundits have struggled to define his political approach. Journalist [Steve Paikin](#), for instance, has suggested that Ford has governed as a more centrist, less traditionally conservative, and less Libertarian premier than expected.

Similarly, academic [Sam Routley](#) has observed a shift toward the political centre, marked by a more moderate and pragmatic governing style. Political consultant [Gerry Nicholls](#) has gone even further, describing Ford as the world's first "post-ideological" leader — one who seemingly adheres to no consistent political doctrine or creed.

Yet what these interpretations share is not clarity, but profound political confusion. This stems from the fact that the political identity of "Ford Nation" was, from its inception, ideologically fluid and opportunistic. Ford's brand of conservatism fits within a longstanding tradition of Canadian Conservative populism, defined by a fervent commitment to market fundamentalism.

At the same time, his governance style has fostered a combative political culture that frames critics as enemies, enabling a growing disregard for democratic norms. His government has increasingly relied on delegated legislation, imposed rigid time limits on committee and House proceedings, and frequently invoked closure to shut down debates.

Ford was also the first Premier in Ontario history to controversially use the notwithstanding clause to slash the size of Toronto City Council during an active municipal election. He later threatened to invoke the clause on two more occasions — once to rewrite Ontario's campaign finance laws, and again to avoid negotiating with unionized education workers.

Although Ford differs in tone and style from figures such as federal Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre, or former Ontario Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris, they all share a common ideological core: a deep faith in private enterprise, deregulation and minimal government oversight.

One of the clearest indicators of Ford's market-driven agenda is the ongoing privatization of Ontario's health care system. In 2023, his government announced a major expansion of publicly funded surgeries to be performed in private, for-profit clinics — covering procedures such as cataract removals and orthopedic surgeries. The policy was framed as a strategy to reduce surgical wait times and enhance patient choice.

"Doug Ford's policies consistently prioritize privatization over public investment, deregulation over accountability and fiscal restraint over social infrastructure, writes Carlo Fanelli"

However, critics, including the Ontario Medical Association and numerous health policy experts, warned that it could exacerbate staffing shortages in the public system and pave the way for a two-tiered health care model, where those with the means to pay receive faster, preferential treatment.

Environmental protections have similarly been sacrificed in the name of accelerating development. Ford's government weakened or eliminated safeguards for endangered species and stripped conservation authorities of key oversight roles. These rollbacks reflect a broader orientation toward deregulation, where the interests of developers often override environmental or community concerns.

Ford's fiscal conservatism also extended to public sector workers. In 2019, his government passed Bill 124, which limited annual wage increases for public sector workers, including nurses, teachers and hospital staff, to just one per cent per year. This policy remained in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite rising inflation and burnout among front-line workers. The courts eventually struck the bill down as unconstitutional, citing its infringement on collective bargaining rights.

As well, his government attempted to slash funding to public health units, school boards and even public libraries. It also restructured autism services, shifting funding toward direct payments to families while capping the support available. These actions all underscored the government's commitment to austerity and worker suppression in the name of fiscal discipline.

Ford's housing policy has consistently prioritized market-based solutions over comprehensive public planning, ignoring the role that speculative development and deregulation played in creating the housing crisis in the first place. Bill 23, the *More Homes Built Faster Act*, aimed to accelerate construction by reducing or eliminating development fees — funds that typically support essential public infrastructure. The cost of these cuts will inevitably fall on municipalities, taxpayers and future homebuyers, doing nothing to lower costs.

The government also attempted to open 7,400 acres of protected Greenbelt lands for private development, breaking explicit promises not to touch it. The plan sparked widespread public backlash and prompted investigations by both the Auditor General and the Integrity Commissioner, ultimately forcing the government to reverse course and leading to the resignation of the then-housing minister.

While Ford's rhetoric often emphasizes pragmatism over ideology, the broader trajectory of his governance tells a different story. His policies consistently prioritize privatization over public investment, deregulation over accountability and fiscal restraint over social infrastructure. Far from ushering in a new kind of centrist or "post-ideological" leadership, Ford has offered a contemporary example of how market fundamentalist principles continue to shape provincial governance — only now cloaked in the language of modernization.

Though Ford has at times reversed course in response to public pressure — this is politics, after all — the deeper pattern remains unchanged. Even when applied pragmatically rather

than dogmatically, these policies reflect a deep and ongoing commitment to shrink the state, weaken labour and empower corporate interests at the expense of the public good.

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