

The premier we didn't deserve

By John Barber, Lakefield

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I come not only to praise Kathleen Wynne, but also to bury her. The auspices for her government are so dire that a eulogy today hardly seems premature. Writing it now lets us imagine what settled opinion in the future, freed from the toxic fog of the current campaign, might make of Wynne and her six-year premiership.

Certainly four years of Premier Doug Ford will be more than enough to clear the air. But even before that, I suspect Wynne will emerge in hindsight as the bold leader of the most capable and effective government Ontario has enjoyed since the heyday of the fabled Big Blue Machine. She will be remembered as the best of her generation, representing Ontario at its best.

The partisan fog during the election campaign was thick enough to obscure even the plainest facts regarding Wynne's Ontario. The province boomed under her government, enjoying record high employment, record low unemployment and sharply rising wages — especially for the lowest paid workers. Under Wynne, the province emerged as one of North America's top magnets for foreign investment, just behind California, with Google leading the parade. The good times rolled on.

And Kathleen Wynne took the blame, her popularity plummeting as the economy soared. Suffice it to say that current public opinion in Ontario will seem just as mysterious in the future as it does today.

In this weird world, the premier's greatest accomplishments proved to be her worst detriments. Her error was to assume that solving problems would win popular support. The opposite happened, as it turned out. But Wynne never stopped solving.

Michael Warren, who began his career as a key operative of the Big Blue Machine that once ruled Ontario so capably, put it well in a 2017 column that decried the opportunism and emptiness of that same Progressive Conservative Party now.

"Meanwhile," he wrote, "the Liberals are stacking up policy initiatives like cord wood."

It's probably safe to say that no one-term government ever passed as much significant legislation as Wynne's. Her boldness in addressing social-justice issues and labour-law reform surpassed anything achieved by Bob Rae's NDP. Her government made massive investments in transit and twinned them with the most

progressive planning legislation in North America. It took concrete action against climate change. It successfully championed a groundbreaking pension reform, invested heavily in child care and early learning, cut Hydro rates, expertly cooled an overheated housing market, moved quickly to protect vulnerable tenants, took action against sexual assault and harassment, offered free pharmacare to youth, and led Canada in the installation of renewable energy.

Even when you disagreed with some aspect of the program, the sheer activism of Wynne's government was undeniable. Also, it would seem, the problem: Wynne did too much, she pushed too hard, she modernized too earnestly — and refractory old Ontario rebelled.

There were certainly some deep reasons for Wynne's downfall apart from those most often cited by her critics. Otherwise we are left to believe that she lost the 2018 election because of festering grievances over an ancient gas-plant scandal that failed to prevent her election in 2014, when they were fresh.

The frequently uttered charge of "corruption" was no more persuasive. As a journalist who spent a good part of his career face-to-face with real political corruption, I'm astounded how freely that word is tossed around today. By any objective measure, the Wynne government was the cleanest in decades. The only thing that came close to a scandal was a ludicrous bribery charge against her aide, Pat Sorbara, which a judge dismissed before the prosecution had finished presenting its non-case.

Likewise, Wynne's government excelled in implementing its ambitious agenda. There was no e-health boondoggle, no ORNGE Air scandal, no gas-plant fandango, no real-estate scams. Wynne's tenure was a master class in political management — and, in the face of populist derangement, it turned out to be terrible politics.

She failed because she was too ambitious, she failed because she never resorted to easy deceptions. She failed because she's a woman, and because she's gay. She failed because she's Ontarian, at the mercy of Ontarians, and we're as ugly as anyone.

The future will judge, and what it will say is that we didn't deserve her.

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