

## Who Speaks for the People of Ontario?

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Recently, speaking of the judicial ruling that found his government's actions in reducing the size of Toronto's city council to be unconstitutional, Premier Ford said: "I believe the judge's decision is deeply concerning and the result is unacceptable to the people of Ontario." He went on to point out that he was elected while the judge was appointed.

Let us leave aside, for the time being, the premier's questioning of the authority wielded by a Superior Court justice in interpreting the Charter of Rights in the Constitution of Canada. Instead, let us focus on the matter of who speaks for the people of Ontario. At least one commentator on yesterday's events suggested that, in making the claim that it is he who does, Premier Ford was acting according to a "populist" political stance. "Populism" is often said to refer to those who believe they represent so-called "ordinary people" as opposed to the members of "elite" groups, whoever they may be.

So let us ask: Who are these ordinary people? On whose behalf does the current premier of Ontario have a legitimate right to speak?

First, as an elected politician, he has an undoubted right to speak on behalf of the constituents in his riding who voted for him. Second, as premier of a government holding a majority of seats in the provincial legislature, he has a right to speak on behalf of that government as a whole. By extension, he may speak on behalf of all the voters in Ontario who elected all of the MPPs in that government party.

But those electors make up, in point of fact, a rather small proportion of all of "the people of Ontario." How small? The calculation runs as follows. First, exclude all those who cannot vote, by reason of age, lack of Canadian citizenship, illness, or anything else. The voting age population in Canada is about 79% of the total population. Then, exclude from the 79% all those eligible to vote who did not do so in the last Ontario election, that is, 42%, leaving us with 58% of 79%, or 46%. Then exclude all those who did not vote for the Conservative Party in that same election, that is, 59.4%, which yields the final figure of 19%. To sum up, the Premier and his party actually have a legitimate right to claim to represent, and thus to speak on behalf of, 19% of the people of Ontario. I invite others to check these calculations and to improve them.

With respect to any specific question of law or policy, such as the law reducing the size of Toronto's city council, it is reasonable to suppose that at least some of the electors who voted for the Conservative Party in the 2018 election might not support that particular law, making it likely that, on this issue, Premier Ford is entitled to speak on behalf of something less than 19% of the people of Ontario.

This strikes me as being a very peculiar form of "populism," if that is indeed what it is, in today's Ontario. Nevertheless, it has become common to refer to an entire group of current political leaders around the world, particularly certain of those in the United States and Europe, as being "populists." It is time for us to have a wider debate in Canada about how well the term populism describes the reality of political formations, and how the term might relate to other characterizations, especially demagoguery.

For example, those who used the term populism approvingly often claim that it reflects the alleged distinction between "ordinary people" as opposed to "élites." The most charitable comment one can make on this word usage is that it is woefully imprecise. The word élite, its proper spelling indicating its French origins, means a part of a larger group that is superior to the rest; the word ordinary, from the Latin and French, and meaning "orderly," carries the following connotations or synonyms: unremarkable, unexceptional, undistinguished, nondescript, colorless, commonplace, humdrum, mundane, and unmemorable. One wonders why the ideological champions of populism would think that this way of characterizing the great majority of people in any society would be regarded as being flattering? How does denigrating the many admirable qualities of people qualify as an indicator of one's support for their alleged political interests? And what is supposed to be derisory about being above-average in terms of quite specific categories such as talent or abilities? It seems that occasional recourse to a dictionary might have been helpful here.