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**Summer's over for Eves' Tories**

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THE RECORD

For Ontario Premier Ernie Eves and his Progressive Conservative cabinet, summer vacation ended yesterday.

Queen's Park is once again open for business. The MPPs are back, sharpening their knives and bracing for a fall sitting of the Legislature that appears likely to point the way toward a spring provincial election.

The Liberals are still leading (or running neck and neck with the Tories) in many polls although, curiously, their leader, Dalton McGuinty, is less popular than the party itself. Polls conducted this month by SES Canada Research Inc. suggests that the Liberal party is favoured by 47 per cent of the Ontario electorate, with the Tories running eight points behind. That eight-point lead, by the way, has been cut in half over the course of the past 12 months, more or less coincident with Eves' ascension to the premier's office.

As for McGuinty, those same polls suggest that only 16 per cent of voters believe him to be the best choice as premier. Eves – despite the continuing turmoil in our schools, the continuing trouble over Hydro privatization, the continuing friction over hospital and health care and the continuing negative fallout from the Mike Harris steamroller – is favoured by 38 per cent of those surveyed.

Those poll results must be encouraging to Eves and his cabinet, even if their only real value is to validate the Tories' strategy of re-branding the premier's office – and the party itself – in the mould of the Bill Davis government of the '70s.

But, re-branded or not, this fall legislative session will be no cakewalk for the ruling Tories. The report on Queen's Park's education funding formula is due in two months and, already, the province's public high school teachers' union is making noises about a February strike unless significant new money is found.

As for the school boards and their fractious, dysfunctional relationship with the government, they estimate that they will need another \$1 billion to provide for an appropriate classroom learning environment.

It is clear – very clear – that the voters of Ontario are at the end of their tether on issues of education and health. They've got so much else to worry about – terrorism, the prospect of war, job security, the meltdown of their families' financial health – that they no longer have the stomach for the gridlock and the rancour that have characterized these issues for the better part of a decade.

For our part, we are willing to give this government some credit for the philosophical distance it has travelled since Eves was sworn to the premier's office in mid-May.

But let's be very clear in our mild endorsement of this work in progress: Eves has been premier for little better than four months and his leadership has yet to be tested in any significant way. Some fortuitous timing has given Eves and his cabinet a four-month honeymoon from the harsh, strict realities of governing.

So, as we push into the first full legislative sitting of the Eves government, let's ask a few questions that we and Ontario's voters might find pertinent:

Will Eves spend his way out of the education mess? Can he make some form of peace with the teachers and school boards without further alienating – and endangering – the province's increasingly pressed taxpayers?

How will this government react to the prospect of health-care reform, particularly as it relates to privately operated MRI and CT-scan clinics? And how will Eves deal with the gnarly question of hydro privatization? And public transit?

And – not that Eves has the authority to do much about the weather – but what about the miserable, dangerous excuse for air that the inhabitants of southern Ontario were obliged to breathe this past summer?

Welcome back to Queen's Park, Mr. Eves. The honeymoon is over. Close up the cottage. It's time to go to work.

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225 Fairway Road South,  
Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, N2G 4E5  
519-894-2231

