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# Same But Different: The 2013 Liberal Intra-Party Transition in Ontario

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*Kathleen Wynne's ascension to the head of the Ontario Liberal party in January, 2013 automatically made her the province's newest premier. Although the Liberals' status as governing party remained unchanged, her victory necessitated the planning and execution of a transfer of power from old party leadership to new. Scholarly studies of transition in Canada and Ontario have generally focused on instances where one party takes power from another. This paper examines the Wynne transition and traces how its intra-party characteristics shaped its features and evolution. It is based on research conducted between February and May 2013 and primarily reflects 15 not-for-attribution interviews with public servants and political figures.*

David Lindsay, one of the architects of Premier Mike Harris' widely praised transition to government in 1995, suggests that all modern transition leaders' efforts centre on four key elements: people; processes; policies; and public relations. The individuals conducting Kathleen Wynne's transition saw their priorities and actions in these areas significantly shaped by the transition's intra-party nature.

First, a turnover in senior personnel – the most significant element in the practical mechanics of the transition – occurred almost exclusively within the Premier's Office, leaving the rest of government offices relatively unchanged. Second, the basic processes and structures of government were kept largely the same, but one major aspect of the transition was a shift towards a more collaborative approach in existing operations. In terms of policy, Wynne's transition priorities were narrow and focussed on stabilizing the province's relationship with its teachers (this particular policy area will not be dealt with in this article). Finally, the overarching public relations goal in transition was to differentiate Wynne's government from her predecessor's. Communicating the government's new

collaborative style and approach early in the transition was important for reinforcing this differentiation.

## Political Preparations

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Dalton McGuinty's surprise resignation from the premiership on October 15, 2012 significantly compressed the time period in which contenders for the Liberal leadership could conduct transition planning. However, the ultimately victorious Wynne campaign did conduct advance preparations, spearheaded by "transition lead" and former cabinet minister Monique Smith. One expert was first contacted about a transition role "well, well before the convention" for his advice on policy and relationships with the public service, furnishing Wynne's campaign with materials he had written on the general subject. According to this expert, this first point of contact came from "a group of people who were thinking about (Wynne's) policy framework and what her priorities should be," and who were trying to establish what positions the potential new premier would take on certain issues she would be inheriting should she win the leadership.

The team that spearheaded the transition period in the weeks after Wynne's victory on January 25 included both core campaign supporters and less partisan advisors recruited for their particular skillsets. Transition lead Monique Smith was involved in the Wynne campaign from its earliest days, while other key transition figures – for example, Deputy Chief of Staff Tom Allison, Chief of Staff Andrew Bevan and Human Resources Chief Shelley Potter – were similarly

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instrumental in Wynne's campaign for leadership. In the words of a senior staffer involved in the transition, these individuals "came off the campaign bus" and set to work during the transition period. In addition to this core group of political supporters, the transition team included individuals who had a minimal role in the leadership campaign, but whose expertise made them valuable in establishing the Wynne government in its early days. This category included former Queen's Park journalist John McGrath and, in a more advisory role in the early planning stages, ex-civil servant Tony Dean.

In the weeks leading up to the Liberal convention, Wynne supporters consulted advisors on the basics of sound transition planning. The advice solicited from such advisors provides a glimpse of a list of priorities and considerations that would be familiar to most *inter*-party transition planners, centering on public administration as opposed to political issues. Wynne transition planners asked questions about the appropriate time to approach the Cabinet Secretary regarding Cabinet Office transition plans, whether any immediate changes should be made in the current Deputy Minister roster, and about whether to change the existing ministry structure. An individual involved summarized these conversations as "advice on immediate changes to architecture and people," compiling a checklist of goals the transition team needed to accomplish in the first 24 hours and first week of the transition, respectively.

The Wynne transition team enjoyed one advantage not widely available to leaders assuming power from the opposition benches: a relatively high degree of assistance from some quarters in the outgoing Premier's Office. Senior McGuinty staff met the day after their boss' resignation announcement to discuss transition planning. According to one McGuinty staffer, the office "did a lot of preparing for what (the incoming team) might need", for example, drawing up a list of potential announcements that the new premier's senior communications staff might need to make in their first week and making notes on key files. Similarly, the Premier's Office staff considered what policy initiatives a new government might want to include in its imminent speech from the throne, while maintaining an awareness that the new premier would not want to simply continue her predecessor's initiatives.

During the transition itself, the relationship between the outgoing and incoming staff complement was initially largely confined to McGuinty Chief of Staff David Livingston and Wynne transition lead Monique

Smith. As the specific roles of those entering the office became clearer, the communication channels between the two groups diversified. A senior McGuinty staffer described these interactions as "fairly informal," with the outgoing group providing advice and assistance. Commenting on their relationship with Wynne's staff, one McGuinty communications aide noted, "it was very simple to work with them... because I knew them from before and there was no confusion about what they needed from us."

### **Timing**

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An underlying force shaping the Wynne transition was the short time period between her victory in the contest for the Liberal leadership and the return of parliament for a new legislative session. Most government transitions are framed by some sense of time limits and compelled by the urgency that such limits produce. However, veterans of previous transitions, in both bureaucratic and political roles, noted that the Wynne example was characterized by unusually intense time pressure. Between Wynne's swearing-in and her speech from the throne, her staff had only eight days to prepare. This compressed timeline was largely self-imposed: part of Wynne's support in the leadership contest rested on her pledge to end the prorogation instigated by her predecessor.

Staff felt this time pressure keenly. As one staff member related, "I just kept my head down for the first month and a half... (the priority was to) just get the product out and hit the points we needed to." Less immediate transition priorities, for example, ensuring the Premier's Office met with the wider civil service, took a backseat to the urgent priorities centered on the throne speech, staffing and cabinet selection. Adding to the pressure, the former premier's agenda remained active even until the eve of transition, including a highly-publicized trip to China only days before the January leadership convention. These activities limited the amount of time his staff and the bureaucracy could spend in preparation for transition. One Wynne staffer succinctly captured the hectic pace, remarking that, with the tempo and volume of work to be accomplished, the foremost priority was "not screwing up."

### **People**

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A dramatic turnover in senior personnel in the Premier's Office was the most significant element in the practical mechanics of Wynne's transition to power. In an intra-party transition such as Wynne's, one might expect that personnel considerations would be much less prominent, given that the governing party remains in power. However, participants agreed that staffing

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changes – focussed on the Premier’s Office – were the most significant tangible feature of the transition. One senior Wynne aide described taking over a Premier’s Office that was “gutted” from a senior personnel point of view. Essentially none of the senior manager-level staffers returned to the new Premier’s Office.

The departure of such senior figures came as no surprise to several transition insiders. Many departing senior staff had worked closely with Dalton McGuinty for years, in some cases even before the Liberals had formed government under his leadership. The retirement of their long-time boss provided a convenient juncture for senior McGuinty staff to pursue other opportunities after years in high-stress and relatively low-paying jobs. As is normal practice, the premier’s departure also triggered the payment of severance packages for his newly unemployed staff, providing a “soft landing” for staff transitioning outside of political life.

In contrast to the new senior echelon in the Premier’s Office, much of the lower level Liberal political office corps was ultimately left intact. One junior Premier’s Office staffer expressed surprise at the degree of continuity in personnel at levels below senior management. Many junior staff were simply re-hired into the positions they had occupied on McGuinty’s last day in office. The eventual high degree of continuity in lower echelon staff roles was an expedient answer to the pressures created by a compressed transition timeframe and, due to the minority in the legislature, the threat of an imminent election. A senior bureaucrat who dealt with the incoming policy branch commented that this continuity provided useful context for the new senior staff and observed that Wynne’s transition was able to preserve “political memory” within the party that proved particularly valuable to individuals assuming senior roles in the Premier’s Office for the first time. Another bureaucrat commented on the rapidity at which many staff could be briefed about key files. In more comprehensive inter-party transitions, every level of personnel “starts from scratch” in getting up to speed on key issues. The advantage gained by keeping existing personnel intact perhaps also explains the absence of any overhaul of senior positions in the bureaucracy.

The body of senior political staff who replaced those departing with the outgoing premier were united by their close previous association with Wynne, and absence of ties to McGuinty. Most of the people who eventually filled key roles in the Wynne Premier’s Office had worked on her leadership campaign. For example, key leadership campaign staffers Tom

Allison and Brian Clow quickly assumed central roles in the Premier’s Office. Many of the staff who filled senior positions also shared a history of working for Wynne in her capacity as a Cabinet Minister in the McGuinty years. Incoming Chief of Staff Tom Teahen, Strategic Communications Manager Siri Agrell and Director of Human Resources Shelley Potter all served the new premier in her earlier ministerial capacities. One individual observed that, in their shared past connections with the premier, several top aides represented a “Don Valley crowd” – referring to Wynne’s first campaign for provincial office.

The time constraints facing Wynne’s transition team compelled the new office to begin substantial work on cabinet selection, the speech from the throne, and other key objectives, before many staff roles could be filled. Achieving these objectives took precedence over establishing the exact composition and structure of the new staff complement. In the early weeks between Wynne’s leadership victory and swearing-in, the less senior staff who had opted not to depart of their own accord were still present, but lacked defined roles or certainty that they would be re-hired into the new regime. The continued presence of these individuals was extremely valuable to the Wynne transition team, who faced tight deadlines and overwhelming amounts of work. As an example, several transition participants highlighted the contributions of Karim Bardeesy, formerly McGuinty’s Executive Director of Policy, who was able to begin work on the throne speech in the transition’s earliest days, before it was clear whether that job would remain his in the new regime. It was only later that Bardeesy was officially re-hired into that role.

Wynne’s most publicized personnel decision was the composition of her cabinet. Her selection of a new executive team represented a high-profile opportunity to signal the complexion and priorities of her government. One consideration that seemed to guide her choices was the need to reward loyalty. All 10 Liberal MPPs who had supported her leadership bid joined her executive council, but so too did almost all of her former leadership rivals. Projecting an aura of party unity and inclusivity was key to her government’s overall tone and approach. The dual pressures of a need for fence-mending as well as a need to reward early backers, could also explain why the new cabinet grew by five members despite media and opposition criticism.

### **Processes**

Wynne’s transition team did not substantially alter most government processes and structures. As was the case with other aspects of the transition, changes that

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did take place occurred primarily in the organization of the Premier's Office. Even in that context, most fundamental processes remained largely unaltered. From a staff organizational point of view, the previous arrangement of a single Chief of Staff in the Premier's Office was altered to split the responsibilities of that role between a Principal Secretary and a Chief of Staff. As with personnel changes, several political staff noted that widespread change in the organization of processes, roles and responsibilities in the government would have been incompatible with the need to quickly put the new government on its feet.

The Wynne transition was more innovative in establishing an official and widely publicized 'transition advisory council'. Seeking the counsel of advisors in setting a direction for an incoming government was not a new phenomenon. However, Wynne's transition advisory council represented an innovative formalization and publicizing of this advice-seeking process. On this council – misleadingly described as a "transition team" in media reports – sat many renowned figures from all spheres of Ontario political and public life, ranging from economist Don Drummond to former NDP Cabinet Minister Frances Lankin to Liberal party heavyweight Greg Sorbara.

The transition advisory council convened in the very first week after Wynne's convention victory, and held several meetings dealing exclusively with issues related to the upcoming speech from the throne. A participant described these meetings as wide-ranging, sometimes lasting several hours, with the premier in "full-blown listening mode," asking members for their opinions on the government's handling of particular issues as well as seeking a "temperature check" and discussion forum to help set the government's general direction. The council's suggestions and feedback were high-level and focussed on broad themes rather than details. The council continued to meet after the throne speech, turning its attention to the next major political milestone: the budget. A senior bureaucrat involved with the throne speech saw this advisory council as an efficient source of direction and means of generating ideas. The group continued to meet well after what might be generally considered the transition period.

While Wynne's transition leaders did not substantially alter the mechanics, processes or structures of government, the government's general approach was made more collaborative. Towards the end of his tenure, McGuinty had stopped producing "mandate letters," in which Premiers had for years previously outlined their expectations and goals for their ministers. Wynne not only resurrected mandate

letters, but made the process more collaborative by asking ministers to provide input on their initial mandate letters before the Premier's office created a final draft. Seeking dialogue in this way contrasted with her predecessor's more top-down approach to his cabinet. Similarly, staff working on the throne speech spent more time consulting ministers directly, than had been general practice, when determining specific details with which to flesh out the broader policy framework. One Liberal insider points to the Premier's Office decision to establish an 8:30 a.m. senior staff meeting as another example of a regime instituting more collaboration in its transition to government. The premier's presence at these meetings was also notable to staff accustomed to the more hands-off approach of her predecessor. A newcomer to the Premier's Office recalled trying to convince colleagues that Wynne's presence (either in person or by phone) at these meetings was not a waste of the premier's time.

One transition leader described a key transition task as changing the relationship between the Premier's Office and ministry offices to reflect the new administration's collaborative methods. Surprisingly, ministry staff, when asked for their opinions, were not initially forthcoming; previously, contacts from the central apparatus would provide direction. There were some downsides to this consultation and hands-on involvement, however. One civil servant commented that, from a bureaucratic perspective, "sometimes... you just want to be told what (the political staff) want."

### **Public Relations**

Wynne's emphasis on collaboration in government processes points to the key public relations message of the transition: differentiation. Delineating a clear break from the previous government is more difficult for those leading intra-party transitions, as a new leader cannot easily repudiate the decisions of her predecessor when she is a member of the same party and, as in Wynne's case, sat at the Cabinet table during its major decisions.

A Wynne transition team member noted that, had McGuinty "gone out on a ray of sunshine" the transition team would have been looking to balance continuity in areas of strength while only making small adjustments to areas of perceived weakness. Instead, the Wynne transition team was searching for ways to show that the new leader was as different as possible from the leadership she was replacing. In the words of one senior staffer, the question facing Wynne's transition team was "how to take credit for the good and push away the bad" by, for example, taking a different perspective on gas plants and labour

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issues. The intense public focus on these issues made differentiation and re-branding in transition key for the Wynne government's survival during its first weeks and months in office.

The speech from the throne was a particularly crucial communication tool. A senior Liberal involved in writing the speech described the process as "introducing the new premier and signalling her differences from Dalton McGuinty." The throne speech was an opportunity to "establish the narrative" of what the new government wanted to say about itself, and its authors wanted this narrative to be noticeably different from what the government had been saying four months earlier. A focus on differentiation was also partly responsible for changing the senior members of McGuinty Premier's Office staff. Keeping "McGuinty people" in key posts would not have fit the narrative of a new government trying to signal a change in direction.

A new tone and style was an integral aspect of the new government's effort to demonstrate its differences from the previous leadership. A senior transition advisor noted that, from the new leader's convention-night acceptance speech onwards, every public appearance was critical for demonstrating her "accessibility, openness, honesty... that she was listening and learning." Several transition team members emphasized that the new leadership style was rooted in the premier's personality, flowing down from her through the levels of government beneath. However, the team also consciously tried to demonstrate this different approach. A senior Premier's Office staffer noted numerous examples – obvious and subtle – of these efforts, describing them as "dog whistles blown to signal (the new style) to provincial politicians." A widely cited example was the premier's practice of beginning public addresses with an acknowledgement that the ground beneath her was traditional native territory.

The new Premier's team also wanted to communicate its new style with the wider bureaucratic and political apparatus. During the transition, Wynne's team arranged a meeting of all Premier's Office and ministerial political communications staff to, in the

words of one staffer, "talk about what we wanted to do, what our approach would be and to take questions." The meeting aimed to signal to government offices outside the centre that the new government sought to take a different approach than the predecessor.

The announcement of Wynne's transition advisory council itself was also a clear attempt to communicate the premier's new approach. An individual involved described that body's unveiling as the key transition "announcable," which, through its non-partisan and diverse composition had the desired effect of signalling the government's new approach. The inclusion of John McGrath on the premier's transition team was itself partially an exercise in media relations. One team member suggested that his status as a former president of the Queen's Park press gallery could bolster the government's relationship with the press. The central bureaucracy was quick to adopt the premier's new style and ensure its emulation at the government's furthest reaches. Cabinet Office went so far as to disseminate a (subsequently leaked) guide for public servants on how to model public communications on the premier's example. A senior civil servant reported that senior political staff were unperturbed by the leak, as it simply affirmed their desired change in the government's communication style.

## **Conclusion**

The Wynne transition's intra-party nature significantly shaped the priorities and actions of those conducting its activities. Few changes and little transition activity occurred beyond the Premier's Office, leaving most processes and personnel largely intact. However, the new premier did effect a significant change in style and approach, partially driven by her need to create distance from her predecessor. Ultimately, leadership transitions are only the second (after winning power) hurdle of many that governments inevitably face. However, they can be important for starting a government on the right – or wrong – foot. The strengths and weaknesses of the Wynne government's transition model will undoubtedly be studied by teams leading future intra-party transitions.