

OPINIONS

New Rae is one of the people he used to warn us about

IN THE WORLD of Canadian politics, nothing has been as fascinating as the metamorphosis of Bob Rae.

Just three years ago, he was a critic from the moderate left — attacking governments for being unfeeling, for being caught up in the corporate agenda, for failing to put people ahead of economic efficiency.

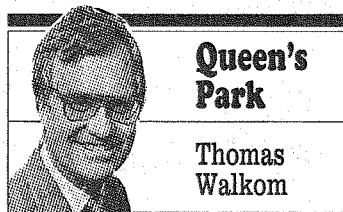
In 1990, then premier David Peterson campaigned on the need for structural economic change. Only if the economy is made more competitive, Peterson said, could Ontario afford the kind of social justice its citizens want.

Rae scorned that approach then. He called it an excuse for inaction. A premier who uses that kind of argument, Rae said then, simply doesn't care.

What a difference time and power make.

Yesterday, Rae chose the University of Toronto's Faculty of Management to deliver a rambling speech outlining his new persona.

As the premier noted, the choice of a business school was



Queen's
Park

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Walkom

no accident. He specifically wanted business people to be among the first to hear his latest thinking.

Rae likes to situate himself inside broad intellectual structures. He did that yesterday by looking at the Canadian polity.

Since the failure of the Charlottetown constitutional accord, he said, Canada has lacked purpose. What is needed now is "a new public philosophy . . . new common values . . . a common agenda to unite the province and the country."

This new public philosophy should be based on positive thinking. Ontarians should be proud of themselves; they shouldn't become discouraged. (While making a nod to former

U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt, Rae sounded here more like his old nemesis Peterson, who used to delight in chastising the NDP leader as a naysaying negativist.)

People always say society can be better, Rae said yesterday. Sure it can be better but look at what we've got, what we've done. Look at Toronto. It's pretty good.

Second, the new public philosophy must concentrate on change — changing the way people do things, the way that government operates, becoming more entrepreneurial, meeting the challenges of the 21st century.

Big shift here. As opposition leader in 1990, Rae sketched out an intriguing set of notes on his personal philosophy titled *What We Owe Each Other*.

This tract concentrated on social obligation, on the need for the better off in a society to be willing to help the less fortunate. Rae talked then of "socialism as love."

He did not talk of becoming more entrepreneurial in order to meet the global challenges of the 21st century. Indeed, he used to

dismiss those he called neo-liberals and neo-conservatives who did talk that way.

But it's how Rae talks now. For governments, he said yesterday, change means recognizing that debt matters. This is why his government wants to control spending.

(Even the \$6 billion in public works Rae announced yesterday is more modest than it sounds. Officials say it commits the government only to spending an extra \$330 million a year for new highways, sewers and water plants over 10 years — not excessive when compared to the government's \$54 billion annual budget.)

Change means managing better, said Rae. It means subsidizing business to train workers, requiring university students to pay higher tuition fees.

Change means radically reforming the welfare system to put those on social assistance to work.

"Simply paying people to sit at home is not smart," Rae said. "It makes little sense simply transferring money to people so they

can stay at home."

Finally, change means not only that government should become more businesslike but that business should be more involved in government. That's what his announcement of three new crown corporations was about, he said. The new agencies will be told to work with private enterprise.

All of this seems a far cry from the Bob Rae who, in 1985, delivered a speech in Washington, D.C. called "The Threat of Privatization."

Some, Rae said yesterday, might not like the ideological bent of his new thinking. In fact, he argued, his thinking is not really new, just "more specific, more precise, more determined."

But critics, he went on, should realize that social justice can only be obtained in a healthy economy.

Or, as Mike Wilson, the Conservative federal industry minister, used to say: You have to let the economic pie grow before you can split it up.