[Transcript] Smokie Thomas - February 13, 2017

From: Andrew Rudyk <arudyk@liberal.ola.org>
To: "Beaudry, Jennifer (OPO)" <jennifer.beaudry2@ontario.ca>, "Bevan, Andrew (OPO)" <andrew.bevan@ontario.ca>, "Forgione, Andrew (OPO)" <andrew.forgione@ontario.ca>, Andrew Rudyk <arudyk@liberal.ola.org>, cbanas@liberal.ola.org, "Codd-Downey, Beckie (GHLO)" <beckie.codd-downey@ontario.ca>, "McPhail, Blane (OPO)" <blane.mcphail@ontario.ca>, "Bossin, Bryan (OPO)" <bryan.bossin@ontario.ca>, "Foerster, Carly (OPO)" <carly.foerster@ontario.ca>, "Walsh, Chad (OPO)" <chad.walsh@ontario.ca>, "McEachern, Gillian (OPO)" <gillian.mceachern@ontario.ca>, jgomez@liberal.ola.org, "Lazarus, Jordan (OPO)" <jordan.lazarus@ontario.ca>, "Moseley-Williams, Kate (OPO)" <kate.moseley-williams2@ontario.ca>, "Killorn, Bill (OPO)" <bill.killorn@ontario.ca>, "Richardson, Kyle (OCOC/GHLO)" <kyle.richardson@ontario.ca>, Swaraj Mann <smann@liberal.ola.org>, "Rowe, Mary (OPO)" <mary.rowe@ontario.ca>, "McIntyre, Moira (OPO)" <moira.mcintyre3@ontario.ca>, Fleur Nouvelot <fnouvelot@liberal.ola.org>, "Appave, Priscilla (OPO)" <priscilla.appave2@ontario.ca>, "MacKenzie, Rebecca (OPO)" <rebecca.mackenzie@ontario.ca>, "Ahluwalia, Ron (GHLO)" <ron.ahluwalia@ontario.ca>, "Le Guern, Ronan (OPO)" <ronan.leguern@ontario.ca>, Joseph Uranowski <juranowski@liberal.ola.org>
Cc: "Auld, Brooke (MOL)" <brooke.auld@ontario.ca>, "Prins, Sebastian (TBS)" <sebastian.prins@ontario.ca>, "Moore, Brynne (MOF)" <brynne.moore@ontario.ca>
Date: Mon, 13 Feb 2017 11:39:55 -0500

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Media: QP Briefing, CBC, Radio Canada, Allison Smith

Thomas:

- Advice on fall on the side of advice of the Auditor General.
- Uh I'm not a pension expert, I'm not an accountant but I have an accountant on staff and I have a pension lawyer that I use so I'll be leaving here trying get my hands on the report and send it over to Susan the pension lawyer that we use
- Um I spoke with Susan on the weekend and she said her opinion was that I have reason to be concerned
- So the reason I'm concerned is, our government has gone to an extraordinary length to have somebody try to disagree and discredit the Auditor General, just like they've done other people who offer independent advice to the people of Ontario
- So I do take seriously the Auditor General's advice and conclusions, what they're saying about the technicalities in the plan like you just can't take money out of the OPSEU plan, that's all true
- But that's not the government's money and once they put that in there the money belongs to the workers
- So the Premier and Deb Matthews and the government been after pension plans, been after me in particular to agree to allow pension plans to invest in a variety of things here in Ontario that we normally don't invest in, things that I'm opposed to
- I'm going to represent the shareholder in the OPSEU pension trust treasury board represents the government so I've been saying no

- So there's I think there's a bigger play here than just the Auditor General, I think when I listen carefully to that report and there's going to be a subsequent report on HOOP who we have a lot of members in and OMERS who we have a lot of members in
- I don't trust the government, I think there's probably going to be 3 or 4 more things to come from this to somehow believe that you can take all, someone else's money right?
- And use it to balance your books, I can't take the surplus and use it to balance OPSEU's book Andy's the treasurer and he can't take that surplus to balance our books
- So I don't know how they get to do that here
- You know the OPSEU Pension Trust administration issued a thing agreeing with this panel, I'll be willing to talk to that guy and his employer as well
- He's got some questions to answer, no one told me he was doing that so he's in deep shit
- Deep trouble sorry
- No he is you don't get to do that stuff, he's a bureaucrat not a politician so this is a political fight with the government it's just starting it's not over yet, I do not trust the government
- They got to have some other play here, every time they get a panel or review or anything else there's more to it than meets the eye
- So they've got an end goal and I'm convinced they have an, they have an endpoint they want to get to
- This is one step along the way
- I'm going to ask the Auditor General if she'd agree to meet with me—I don't know if she can or not, but I don't see why she couldn't
- So I'll be putting in a call in today to see if I can meet the Auditor General to discuss a bit further

*Media: But do you, do you trust this *inaudible*? You say you don't trust the government, but this is an independent panel.*

Thomas:

- Yeah, so what?
- If I ask you to go look at something, I give you the terms of reference
- They're operating under the terms of reference here, OK?
- I know Murray Gold, I've known him for years
- Him and I have disagreed on many, many things
- He helped write the text of the OPSEU pension trust years ago, so, yeah, I've got my issues with, with trusting this panel because this, it all depends—I've been doing this stuff for a long, long time —it depends on what the terms of reference are and the questions that you're asking
- So, to me, it's on the political side, you're trying to discredit the Auditor General
- Perhaps the Auditor General has more things to report on
- Look at the climate change stuff, look what they did, you know—I mean, so they try and discredit everybody that disagrees with them
- So, again, I—do I trust the panel?
- I think technically they might be right, but I'm not 100 percent sure
- And I, just, again, they're doing the bidding of government
- They're not, you know—the, the pension plans, we didn't say go say 'let's strike a panel and look at it'
- All that other stuff the government's reviewing, they didn't come to us and say 'we're going to review all this other stuff'
- So there's more to this story, I think, than just what this group's reporting on

- And I think we'll see it play out in [time]

Media: Can you give us an example of something the government's been asking you to invest in, with the pension funds?

Thomas:

- Yeah, public-private partnerships
- And here's the problem, you see—the Auditor General already showed that over a 10-year period, the government spent 10-billion, that's with a B, 10-billion-dollars more of the taxpayers' money, than they needed to, in dealing with the public-private partnership, versus traditional financing methods
- So the Premier's been after me to agree to have our pension plan—the OPSEU pension trust, and others—invest in P3s here in Ontario
- They do it around the world, they invest around the world—I don't like that—but there are different structures around the world
- So I'm not going to have workers' money put into something that we have a fundamental problem with, and that's how they—well, I've said to the Premier, I was at a pension conference that she spoke at, I spoke just before her
- And I said to her, she said 'well you and I have discussed many times about pension plans investing in P3s',
- I said 'yes, we have, and I'm not changing my mind'
- Here's my—one of my—conditions
- The first, biggest one is, if you change how P3s are structured so that they're transparent, there's no secrets, that you apply socially-responsible investment practices that all pension plans have—United Nations investment practices, that they've all signed onto—if you agree to all that first, we'll maybe sit down and talk, but they won't agree to that
- See they want to invest workers money their way right and I'm not agreeing to have worker's money invested anybody way other than the manner which is invested befitting the workers who put that money in there
- And by the way the other side of the government's money belong to the workers they get that lit bit of the share of the surplus
- I said in a meeting once we had a bill, we had about a billion dollars we'd like benefits improvement and benefits reductions for are figures out of are half of the surplus the government used it to reduce what they actual planed I think if I recall correctly
- And for this group to say somehow that you the government can't sell a road well that's not true they sold the 407 she tried to toll the Don Valley and QEW I mean they are making some assumptions here on what a government can and can't do
- So now that they filed they report now it becomes a political football becomes a political question and I predict again that the fight just begun
- I'm not sure where it's going but there are up to something and I think it not good for workers

Nanji: do you think that the terms of the OPSEU plan maybe need to be look at again?

Thomas:

- I’m gonna, it’s one of the very things I’m doing when I leave here I’ve ask for the whole plain text
- I was on the executive board of OPSEU when we negotiated that with the NDP but I can’t remember I’m not a you know, the plain text is that thick
- So there are rules around that the government can’t just take money arbitrarily but they can their side of the surplus so but again I think this is just one step along the way there is something else coming and the other shoe wasn’t drop yet

Smith: So you think they are going to try to take some of the surplus from the plan?

Thomas:

- Oh they are desperate to get… well they are desperate for two things money for P3’s which invest in infrastructure the way they want to do it and to balance their books so I’m just not *inaudible* come on the backs of working people not the members I represent anyways