
CBC ONTARIO MORNING INTERVIEW WITH ROB BENZIE

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Speaker(s): Rob Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star; Patrick Brown, Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader

[CLIP] GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO ADVERTISEMENT: Starting this summer, households in Ontario will receive an average of 25-per-cent off their hydro and your bill won't increase beyond the rate of inflation for at least four years. We've heard you. Hydro needs to be fair for everyone across the province and we've made fundamental changes to ensure this in the long-term. Find out more about your reduction at Ontario.ca/fairhydroplan, paid for by the Government of Ontario.

CBC: Public service announcement or partisan propaganda? That ad, paid for by the Government of Ontario, has the opposition shooting sparks. They are accusing the Liberals of contempt of Parliament. Rob Benzie has been covering this issue. He's Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star and we've reached him in Toronto this morning. Hi Rob.

ROB BENZIE, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF FOR THE TORONTO STAR: Good morning Wei.

CBC: Alright, so the opposition parties are accusing the Liberals of contempt of Parliament, what's their argument?

BENZIE: Well they feel that because this 25-per-cent rate cut which is actually a 17-per-cent rate cut because remember rates went down 8-per-cent on January 1st; so there's an additional 17-per-cent. So the total is 25-per-cent but it's not like the 25-per-cent is just-- is one fell-- is in one fell swoop is happening at the same time. The additional 17-per-cent doesn't take effect until June or so. So the government says well look we have to tell people that their higher rates are coming down. The Progressive Conservatives and the New Democrats say well wait a minute you haven't shown us the details yet. All we have is this plan to have this but we haven't seen anything official yet and we haven't had anything passed in the legislature. It's a process argument that they're making to Speaker Dave Levac, and I don't think that it will be ruled in contempt but it is problematic from the Liberals point of view because they, at the same time as they're putting out government ads they have Liberal party ads that are different, that are paid for by the Liberal Party not by taxpayers. And they're handing out pamphlets that talk about the 25-per-cent rate cut.

CBC: How unusual is it for a government to take out advertising space for something like this?

BENZIE: It's more unusual than it used to be because they changed the laws in 2015. Before 2015, between 2004 and 2015, the auditor general had its very strict powers over what could go in government advertising and they watered those powers down. The Liberals gave the auditor general that power in 2004 and almost immediately regretted it. When they introduced the

Harmonized Sales Tax in 2010. Well, it was a disaster promoting it because the auditor general at the time wouldn't allow them to tell any of the benefits of the tax. The rules were so restrictive. So when Kathleen Wynne succeeded Dalton McGuinty in 2013 that one of the things that they looked at doing and then finally did two years later was watering down this legislation. Patrick Brown told me yesterday that if he's elected next year in the election the Tories would strengthen that power for the auditor general again. I would be very surprised if they did that because it's a very tricky thing for governments. Once you get in power and you see that you can actually promote the government's agenda, it's very difficult to give that up.

CBC: The province's auditor general had said even that she would never have approved the ads under the previous rules that allowed her that discretionary power. Now, what has been the government's response to all of this is?

BENZIE: Unrepentant. They say, look we have heard that people need to know about these hydro rate cuts. I was speaking with MPPs after the Liberal caucus meeting yesterday at Queen's Park where they were reporting back to their bosses and to the Premier what they were hearing during the March Break in their ridings. And this has helped the government in the sense that people are getting the message. They have polling that shows something like 80-per-cent of Ontarians are aware of the rate cut is coming. People on their hydro bills now, even though the rate cut has not yet taken effect, are on the hydro bills that-- a note about, here in Toronto for example, that you're going to get this rate cut. So I think that the promotional campaign part of this policy has been effective. Now remember, this smoothing out of hydro rates over the next few years is going to add about \$25-billion in interest costs over you know the next few decades. So we're mortgaging-- we're taking a longer mortgage than maybe we should but we're going to have shorter pay-- less short-term pain in terms of having lower hydro bills for the next few years.

CBC: Alright moving on, the PCs meanwhile are putting out some ads of their own on YouTube. In case our listeners aren't familiar with them, have a listen. Here's a warm and fuzzy Patrick Brown.

[CLIP] PATRICK BROWN, ONTARIO PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE LEADER: It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter who you love. It doesn't matter if you belong to a union. It doesn't matter how much you make. It doesn't matter where you worship. You have a home in the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario.

CBC: So Rob Benzie, what are the Tories going for with these ads?

BENZIE: Well on the visuals that we obviously can't show on the radio, it shows Patrick Brown marching in Toronto's Gay Pride Parade, the Khalsa Day Parade, the big Sikh festival here. It shows a big tent. It's Mr. Brown trying to say to voters that he is not your father's Progressive Conservative leader. They're re-positioning him way to the centre, and the thing is; remember he became leader in 2015 with the help of social conservatives, the religious right, and a lot of those people are feeling betrayed right now that Mr. Brown has moved more to the mainstream. Now, his supporters say look we have to get elected in 2018. We can't appeal to only one pretty narrow fringe of society and we have to be appealing to cultural communities which Mr. Brown has done a very, very good job of reaching out to new Canadians. He's very, very popular in the South Asian communities in and around the Greater Toronto Area and they want to appeal to female voters. I mean this is a party that has lost every election since 1999. They've lost four in a row. They don't want to lose five in a row. They are Ontario's natural governing party, at least they used to be. They were in power for you know 50 of the of the past 75 years or so and then

you know they've been in a real big slump for a long time. So I think that they feel that they want to modernize the party and they're attracting more female candidates, more visible minority candidates. So I think that it's a modernization. Now the Liberals are saying well wait a minute don't believe this guy because look at his voting record was like when he was a federal MP on Parliament Hill when he was in support of, you know, limiting abortion and against same sex marriage. He's changed his positions on those issues and he's talked quite passionately about his own personal kind of evolution. But still you know his enemies, his political enemies, are going to say well wait a minute he's faking it. I don't know if he is or not, but I do know that these ads are very different than we've seen from the Progressive Conservatives before.

CBC: Yeah, and we'll see how much real estate there is in that middle ground.

BENZIE: Exactly. Exactly.

CBC: Rob, thanks very much for this.

BENZIE: All right Wei, talk to you soon.

CBC: Bye now. Rob Benzie is the Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star