

QP BRIEFING

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1). NOMINEE MARIT STILES HOPES TO TURN THE NDP TIDE IN DOWNTOWN TORONTO

By: David Hains Christina Martins

In a downtown boutique hotel Sunday, New Democrats expressed hope that with their latest nomination, they'll be able to gain ground in vote-rich Toronto.

The nomination of federal NDP president Marit Stiles to the downtown west-end riding of Davenport included a show of institutional support. Among the 200 to 250 people in attendance at the Gladstone Hotel were party leader Andrea Horwath and local NDP stalwarts such as former MP Andrew Cash, councillor Mike Layton, councillor Joe Mihevc and Parkdale—High Park nominee Bhutla Karpoche.

"I am so excited to get going and start campaigning," Stiles told QP Briefing.

Stiles, who is currently a Toronto District School Board trustee, knows the objective is clear.

"We've got a chance to take this riding back."

The NDP was reduced to two of 22 Toronto seats in the 2014 election, down from five in the previous election. The result was a disappointment for a party that flatlined at 21 seats in the legislature, and saw losses for longtime Toronto stalwarts such as Michael Prue and Rosario Marchese, as well as for promising first-time MPP Jonah Schein.

Now the party wants to make inroads in Ontario's biggest city for an anticipated spring 2018 election.

Davenport is ripe for an NDP pickup. The Liberals won the riding from the New Democrats in 2014 when Christina Martins beat incumbent Schein by six percentage points.

In an interview with QP Briefing, Stiles hit on some key party points, including the NDP proposal to return local transit operating funding to a 50-50 deal between the province and the city, more affordable housing and non-profit child-care spaces.

But the first passion for the rookie school trustee is education, which she argues is underfunded.

"There's a re-think that has to happen. The band-aid approaches (the Liberals) are throwing together are not going to do the job," she said.

Among the problems she points to are the capital repair backlog for Toronto schools, closing schools and flaws with standardized testing. She supports the idea that developer charges should go to the Toronto District School Board to help support capital repairs and reviewing the education funding formula "in its entirety."

When she's not walking her dogs, Lois and Stevie Nicks, Stiles anticipates she'll be meeting a lot of constituents in the lead-up to the expected spring 2018 election.

"I'm going to knock on some more doors and talk to people to hear what they're feeling, and hearing what their dreams are."

(File photo of Stiles by Vince Talotta/Toronto Star)

2). GOVERNMENT DEFENDS \$5.5M BUDGET FOR HYDRO BILL RELIEF ADS

By: Jessica Smith Cross

Government ministers are defending a publicly funded ad campaign that tells Ontarians something they can learn just by opening their mail — that their hydro bills are going down.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath went after the government in question period on Monday over documents her party obtained that show the government allocated a budget of \$2.5 million in 2016-17 and another \$3 million in 2017-18 to advertise the Fair Hydro Plan. Through an HST rebate, the program reduces residential hydro bills by an average of 25 per cent. It does so by shifting the costs of some social support programs to the tax base and also through a massive borrowing scheme.

"Let's talk about using public dollars for partisan purposes," Horwath said in question period. "We know from the FOI documents on my desk right now that the reason for this ad campaign in the first place was 'negative media coverage' for the premier and her Liberal party. Has this premier not yet learned her lesson about these sneaky kinds of tactics and that Ontarians are fed up with this kind of behaviour by this Liberal government?"

The NDP documents include a brief to the Advertising Review Board for a television and pre-roll campaign to run from February to September 2017, which cites the "negative media coverage of rising electricity bills," saying, "Despite recent cost reduction actions the government has implemented, the overriding messaging from the media has been unreasonably high costs associated with electricity."

Many of the ads aired so far tell listeners and viewers little more than the fact that the government has taken action to lower hydro bills by 25 per cent on average and will hold increases to the level of inflation for four years.

Ontario's auditor general described them as "pat-on-the-back" advertising earlier this year.

Treasury Board President Liz Sandals defended the ads by telling reporters after question period that Ontarians "outside of the bubble" don't know as much as government policy as those who spend their days at Queen's Park.

"The hydro bills are very, very confusing in many cases, certainly that's the reaction I get from my constituents," she said. "We want to make sure that people actually know what is going on. Citizens are entitled to know what's going on. It might make them happier, it might make them less happy."

But was she suggesting that citizens aren't "with it" enough to notice changes to their bills?

"Absolutely not," Sandals said.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault, on the other hand, suggested just that. He said he doesn't know how a significant number of his constituents could have missed the fact that their electricity bills have fallen, but they have.

"That's a question you need to ask some of the people I'm talking to, but there are still people out there who have not noticed their bill has dropped by 25 per cent," Thibeault said.

"We've been hearing from them that they've had a hard time, as they've said before, choosing between heating, eating, and now, as we're moving forward into those winter months, they can plan for this," he said.

Thibeault also defended the ads as a way to let the public know they can sign up for government programs that reduce their bills, the Ontario Electricity Support Program (OESP) in particular.

"This is a program that has increased the refund that many families who qualify will get for it. We have prepared and have a budget to help 500,000 families through the OESP and we're nowhere near that number yet. We want to ensure that every single person who qualifies for this can sign up for this program," Thibeault said in question period. "We cannot rely on the opposition parties to talk about these programs, so we need to ensure that the government has its responsibility to raise awareness about these programs and services that are actually helping Ontarians."

However, none of the ads actually mentions the OESP. Colin Nekolaichuk, a spokesperson for Thibeault's office, confirmed this for QP Briefing, saying that the government decided to use the ads to point people to information about the OESP and other programs on a website instead.

He added that if the government advertised the fact that low-income Ontarians can sign up for the OESP, it would be obligated to also mention other electricity-related programs at the same time and it would be too complicated.

"So, to keep it as simple of a message as possible, they decided to point people to the website," Nekolaichuk said.

Thibeault said people are struggling with the complexity of the OESP, with 232,115 customers signed up so far — fewer than half the number the government has budgeted for.

He said that's because people aren't aware of the program and it's complicated to apply for, as the Canada Revenue Agency requires an ink signature from people to allow them to access the income-tested program.

3). *IN BRIEF: GAS PLANTS DELAY, FRANCO-ONTARIAN DAY, THE 'NORTHERN SLUR' AND MORE*

By: Jessica Smith Cross

The gas plants email trial carried on today in a Toronto courtroom, where the defence continued to challenge the independence of Robert Gagnon, a retired OPP officer who was hired as a contractor in the case, delaying the start of witness testimony in the case. The defence argues that Gagnon, who worked for 18 months on the case including many unpaid hours, cannot be considered impartial and thus shouldn't be allowed to give opinions on the case. Judge Timothy Lipson is expected to rule on the matter when court re-convenes on Wednesday.

Premier Kathleen Wynne applauded the "risk-takers" including Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma who gathered at the Alibaba's Gateway Canada 2017 conference at Exhibition Place this morning. The conference is for entrepreneurs who want to learn about business opportunities in China.

Ontario's Francophone community celebrated the 42nd anniversary of its flag today with a ceremony at Queen's Park. Francophone Affairs Minister Marie-France Lalonde wished everyone happy Franco-Ontarian Day.

"As a Franco-Ontarian and, for the first time, as Minister of Francophone Affairs, I am especially pleased and proud to celebrate the eighth annual Franco-Ontarian Day," she said in a press release. "Our government continues to reinforce its commitment to the preservation and advancement of the francophone community in Ontario. This has been demonstrated through the province's membership in the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, the creation of Ontario's first Ministry of Francophone Affairs and the province's proposal to establish a French-language university governed by, and for, francophones."

The Progressive Conservatives continue to allege that Liberal MPP Lou Rinaldi called northern Ontario "no man's land" when he heckled the opposition benches during a debate last week, a charge Rinaldi denies.

Things got heated this morning with both Liberals and Tories having to withdraw comments made in the heat of enthusiastic partisanship.

Vic Fedeli, PC MPP for Nipissing, dubbed the "no-man's land" comment "a northern slur" and then accused Rinaldi of lying about it.

"We've all seen the video. The member from Northumberland—Quinte West yelled a northern slur to the member for Parry Sound. I was not in the chamber at the time. It's the member's shifting explanations he's sending to my constituents that are in 'no man's land,'" Fedeli said. "My constituents want an honest answer from this government. Either they apologize to the north, or they're telling all their MPPs it's okay to answer the north with lies."

Rinaldi, for his part, challenged the PCs to repeat their allegations outside of the chamber, where they're not protected from a libel suit.

4). STRATEGIST BEHIND WYNNE'S 2014 VICTORY STEPS ONTO PUBLIC STAGE

By: Christopher Reynolds

He's ferried prime ministers and premiers to power. He's been the self-described "pointy edge of the stick" in Liberal factional fights. He's strategized as a behind-the-scenes player in Canadian politics for 33 years. But David Herle, strategist and pollster, isn't all prickly political bristle. He has a softer – or at least a recreational – side.

The side that likes rum and cokes. "A lot. I've spent my life arguing about why Elton John is the best artist of the rock era. I know all the words to Caddyshack. And I think both journalism and capitalism are headed for a crisis," he says on the trailer for his new podcast, the Herle Burly.

Herle (pronounced HER-LEE), 55, known to politicos from Queen's Park to Parliament Hill as the wizard behind the Gandalf Group – the polling firm he founded in 2006 – is now stepping onto the public riser himself.

The fresh podcast offers up a platform – different than the type he's helped build for former prime minister Paul Martin and Premier Kathleen Wynne – to chat one-one-one with political and cultural heavyweights about politics, sports, music "and – importantly – how many guys Russell Crowe killed in the movie Gladiator. It's 73."

The first episode, posted Sept. 19, finds Herle gabbing with past Barack Obama strategist David Axelrod, whose own podcast, The Axe Files, Herle sees as a model. "It's a big influence on me," he said.

The duo chatted recently about how the Chicago Cubs were for decades "a symbol of futility," in Axelrod's words. "The Bears? I just skip over that discussion."

"Why, what are ya, Giants?" Herle asks.

"No, they're just not good."

"Oh."

Next on Herle's list of interviewees are Canadian music industry legend Denise Donlon and Rob Ford's so-called secret weapon Nick Kouvalis, the political consultant behind the Campaign Research firm.

Both guests offer juicy quotes.

"That never happened to me, the having-sex part," Donlon says of the music business. "I don't know what was wrong, maybe I was six-foot-one, maybe I was just too tall," adds the former president of Sony Music Canada and past director of CBC Radio's English language services who was in on the ground floor at MuchMusic.

Kouvalis, the "black sheep of Canadian politics," according to Herle, lets it be known that, "if I had to pick between (Donald Trump] and Hillary Clinton, I would pick him 10 times out of 10.")

Herle: "Oh. 'Kay..."

The program is edgier and less structured than network political segments such as CBC's At Issue team or CTV's Power Play segment, with Herle and guests unafraid to toss around the odd cuss word tossed or drop an innuendo.

"Take a selfie as you're listening to the show ... and we'll put it up there, as long as you're at least 40 per cent dressed," Herle tells listeners. "And I don't care which 40 per cent.

"That's why we've got the 'explicit' rating from iTunes," he adds. "No kids can listen to our podcast."

Herle launched the podcast after getting encouragement from both his peers and his experience on the Insiders segment of CBC's flagship news program the National. "But the Insiders was a pretty tight format of dispassionate analysis as opposed to a point of view," he said.

Herle has headed up two national re-election campaigns for the Liberals, helped return the Grits to power in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and clawed the Ontario Libs back to a majority in 2014 — but it was Tolkien who taught him the most about power.

"The fact that people who have it never want to give it up, how addictive it is," he said. The fact that people who want it have to take it; it never comes to you.

"I don't think I've ever seen a political party in office that thought our time is really up, and it would be better for the country or the province if we were out. The longer you're in, the more indispensable you come to think that you are," Herle said.

In an interview with QP Briefing, the veteran politico offered up no shortage of opinions – or frankness – on the upcoming Ontario election, scheduled for June 7, 2018.

"It's a tough fight. The government is trying to seek a fifth term of office, and that's unusual for that to be successful," said Herle, who's helming Wynne's re-election campaign. "But I think we've got a very good chance."

"Any government that's been in office for 15 years is going have made probably everybody mad at one point or another, and maybe several times over," he added.

One thing that's made some people mad is that Herle's Gandalf Group received nearly \$3 million in polling contracts, a tender Progressive Conservatives called "shameful," considering his Liberal ties.

And Herle acknowledges his key role in the re-election campaign could restrict him on air. "Obviously you can't do anything on the podcast that would jeopardize the reelection effort. It's less that I might say something damaging than I might say something revealing – revealing of our strategy."

As for the PCs, their recent nomination controversies "will not hurt them at all," Herle said.

But he sees them drawing the wrong lessons from their 2014 loss under then-leader Tim Hudak. "Because they think they lost the last election because Hudak said something, they don't want to say anything." Herle also believes the PC's strategy of holding off on policy positions, as in the case of hydro, to keep the media glare on the Grits has been "clever to date," but will ultimately fall through.

“The longer they don’t say anything, the more it is that people will think that they’re simply inadequate,” he opined.

Born into a Saskatchewan farm family and raised in Regina – “I know more about wheat than I know what to do with” – he moved to Montreal in the mid-1980s in part to escape the Prairies’ poor economic prospects at the time. When he was 22, he followed his ambition, not his heart, in the 1984 Liberal leadership race “for experience purposes,” lending his talents to a rival candidate over his favourite, John Turner, who went on to win the leadership and, for two-and-a-half short months, the Prime Minister’s office. He’s regretted it ever since. “I found that a really joyless experience,” he said.

Herle’s known lows.

“On election night 2011, when the Liberal (Party of Canada) was reduced to a poor third-place standing, and the NDP were now the official opposition, I thought that night that it was more likely than not that the Liberal party would never form the government again in Canada,” Herle admits.

Though he was closely affiliated – indeed, “one of the lead agitators” for – ex-federal finance minister Paul Martin’s camp in the running battle to crown him over then-prime minister Jean Chretien, Herle also knows not everyone is interested in keeping score on insider baseball.

“John Turner once said to me in the midst of the (1986) Chretien revolt against him – we were talking about that day’s machinations about who had said what to whom and who was knifing whom – and he said to me, ‘These things may be of some interest to the mothers of some of the people involved. But out there in the country, nobody gives a shit.’ ”

Herle’s also known the bittersweet taste of minority government after co-chairing Martin’s campaign in 2004, as felt the sting of defeat in 2006 when the Liberals, under his campaign management, ceded power to Stephen Harper’s Conservatives in Ottawa after 13 years of uninterrupted rule.

Herle has bigger things on his mind at the moment though, like wealth in the 21st century, that he wants to raise on his podcast.

“I think that we’re heading toward an FDR-type of moment,” Herle said. Martin, his “mentor” and “father figure,” was, like Turner, often associated with the Bay St. wing of the Liberal tent.

“If you have a very large proportion of the population that thinks that we have a system that does not work for them, that ultimately they will force change in that system. And our stable liberal democratic capitalist system has rested on the balance and a feeling of shared prosperity and shared opportunity, and that a rising tide genuinely lifts all boats, as John F. Kennedy said. And that sentiment has clearly been lost,” Herle said. “And not just a sentiment that’s been lost; in reality, that’s no longer true.”

His heroes? Former U.S. president Lyndon B. Johnson, “the last great liberal”; Pierre Trudeau, “absolutely the person that led me into the level of involvement in politics that I have”; and federal Public Safety Minister and Regina native Ralph Goodale, “a close friend.”

His dream guests? Elton John, “because he’s been my favourite musical artist for 40 years.”

Also German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to discuss her “low-key, non-class-warfare managerial style of holding Germany together through a lot of tough pressure.”

Until then, he and Hall of Fame goaltender and former Liberal MP Ken Dryden will chew the fat in an upcoming episode on “everything from what it was like to win the most valuable player of the playoffs in your rookie season to his prescriptions for ending head injuries,” Herle said.

“Yeah, I’m going to be all over the place.”