
OTTAWA MORNING INTERVIEW WITH ROB BENZIE

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CBC: A cynical ploy or need to know information; Hydro One's new easier to read utility bills have been causing headaches at Queen's Park. At issue, a box that spells out exactly how much money you save thanks to the provincial rebate, the so-called Fair Hydro Plan. And that's not fair, according to the opposition parties. For more on this we've reached Rob Benzie, Queen's Bureau Chief for The Toronto Star. Good morning Rob.

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

CBC: I think I can imagine the answer to this question but why are the NDP and Conservatives crying foul over these new bills?

BENZIE: Well this is a new bill that people who are Hydro One consumers, ratepayers, would receive. I don't receive one at my house. I get a Toronto Hydro bill. So it depends who your provider is. But on the Hydro One bill it says that, under the so-called Fair Hydro Plan, you receive a 25-per-cent rebate. That's the 8-per-cent of the provincial portion of the HST plus another 17-per-cent that the Liberal government added conveniently that last summer because of course this was a really hot issue that you and I have talked about many times over the last few years or so. And so they've added this to the bill, or Hydro One which is majority privately owned now - the government sold it off, they own 49 percent still - has added this to the bill and the NDP in particular is very vexed about this; talking about it at Queen's Park a lot. The Tories aren't happy about it either but the irony of the Tories not liking it is that they're going to add another 12-per-cent rebate under their plan if they're elected in the June 7th election. So there's a little bit of jockeying going on. The Liberal government responds by saying, look we don't tell Hydro One what to put on their bills, but they're not unhappy that this is on the bill because of course they want people to know as they're thinking about who they're going to vote for that they're paying cheaper hydro thanks to this rebate which of course is a subsidy. They're borrowing money to pay--to see much cheaper hydro rates right now. So you'll pay longer and more in the long run.

CBC: OK so the NDP doesn't like it because they think it's a political move. Did the government respond to that?

BENZIE: Yeah, I mean they say it's not political they say. They say Hydro One as a private company and they do what they want to do. I mean obviously it's not bad for the government if Hydro One puts this on the bill and I'm sure Hydro One knows that but Hydro One would say, look we're simplifying the bills which they have done because I don't if you remember Hallie but your hydro bill used to be as complicated as a tax form. It was crazy. So it's a lot more streamlined now--

CBC: And they were getting all sorts of phone calls from people going where's my Fair Hydro Plan rebate?

BENZIE: Exactly, exactly. And people were saying why--I'm not seeing it so they had to spell it out for people.

CBC: Right.

BENZIE: And this is not a totally new phenomenon. A few years ago there used to be the clean, the so-called Clean Energy Benefit. That was a rebate that the government put on your hydro bill and that used to be a line item all to itself as well.

CBC: Okay. You mentioned the Conservative election promise is even bigger cuts. Now are they saying that they would force Hydro One to take that line item off if and when they come in?

BENZIE: No, in fact what the Tories want to do is they want to reduce hydro rates by another 12-per-cent by returning the--because the government still owns 49-per-cent of the shares of Hydro One it gets a couple hundred million dollars a year in dividends because it's actually a well-run company, go figure. So it's performing pretty well in the stock market. So they get this dividend. The Tories say if they win government next year they're going to send that dividend back to ratepayers and they worked it out to be about a 12-per-cent increase-- or decrease on your bill. So, and it be 12-per-cent off the 25-per-cent. So it's a big chunk of change. 12-per-cent off the reduced bills, the existing reduced bill. So they'll have a line item. Trust me; if they win they'll have a line item.

CBC: Moving on to another of Patrick Brown's key five election pledges, have mental health spending. Nepean-Carlton MPP Lisa MacLeod traded words with the Health Minister, Eric Hoskins, over this. Describe what happened. What was the issue?

BENZIE: This was a bit of an uncomfortable scene Hallie. Lisa MacLeod, very popular MPP, Tory MPP Nepean-Carlton member. She has spoken at length about her own personal challenges with mental illness and overcoming a lot of things that she had to deal with in recent years and it's been--it was very powerful that she spoke out about this. And she was talking in the House about the Tory's plan to spend one point \$1.9-billion over the next 10 years on mental health funding. And in the course of the question Hoskins, the Health Minister who is a physician and is, you know, a stand-up guy by all accounts. He said--he started mocking the name of Tory platform which is the People's Guarantee. This is the platform that the \$1.9-billion in mental health money is in and he said you know the People's Guarantee was a bank that failed in Kansas in the 1890s. And I think some people thought it was a bit insensitive just given the nature of the subject that Lisa MacLeod was talking about in the House, but no one is suggesting that Dr. Hoskins, he's a physician, was making light of mental illness. He was making light of the name of the platform and he, in his response to Lisa he said, look we are spending a lot of money on mental health issues and we're spending billions on it in fact over the years. So, but it was one of those situations where, I don't know, maybe we're living in a time of heightened sensitivity but a lot of us kind of cringed at this exchange.

CBC: Because of the personal nature of it from Lisa MacLeod [Inaudible].

BENZIE: I mean I mean. And Lisa has really spoken passionately about this and she's a very popular MPP; well regarded in the Liberal benches, the Tory benches and the NDP benches. So

I think it was one of those situations. And I don't think that Hoskins with meaning to be, sound glib, but he did some glib.

CBC: Rob, thanks very much for this.

BENZIE: All right Hallie.

CBC: Take care. That's Rob Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief for The Toronto Star.