

Afternoon Media Scan: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan - March 27, 2017

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[Click links below to view article:](#)

Online Coverage

[Toronto Sun: Grits knew for months hydro was public's top concern](#)

[SaultOnline.com: NDP's Krmpotich hearing all about skyrocketing hydro bills on the doorstep](#)

TV Transcripts (Noon)

[None](#)

Online Coverage

Toronto Sun: GRITS KNEW FOR MONTHS HYDRO WAS PUBLIC'S TOP CONCERN

By: The Canadian Press

March 27, 2017

<http://www.torontosun.com/2017/03/27/grits-knew-for-months-hydro-was-publics-top-concern>

Ontario's government learned from its own polling that the rising cost of hydro was people's top concern 10 months before the Liberals publicly acknowledged it and announced an eight-per-cent reduction on electricity bills.

The government-commissioned polling from 2013 to 2016 — examined by The Canadian Press — tells a tale of increasing distress about hydro rates over months, even years before across-the-board relief was introduced.

Monthly tracking shows that in December 2013, the cost of electricity became the worst-ranked issue based on performance, with 70 per cent of respondents saying the government was on the wrong track.

Specific questions on electricity appear in July 2014 and again in March 2015, when polling found most people had done something in the past year to make their homes more energy efficient, and a majority supported the often-maligned time-of-use pricing.

Then in November 2015, electricity — and the privatization of Hydro One — surged to become a top issue of concern in the province, with 13 per cent of respondents saying it should be the government's top priority, over perennial concerns such as health, jobs, the economy and education.

In just one month, the percentage of respondents who rated the government's performance on controlling electricity prices as poor jumped from 38 per cent in October to 47 per cent in November.

By January 2016, jobs, the economy and health took over as areas of greater concern for the next few months, but the Gandalf Group polling told the government that controlling electricity prices was among its main perceived weaknesses and communications should focus on it.

Government responses to opposition questions about rising hydro bills over much of the 2013 to 2016 time frame focused on defending the cost of hydro as the result of building a clean and reliable system, while highlighting measures the government had already taken to lower consumer costs, such as a low-income support program and removing the debt retirement charge.

It wasn't until a Sept. 1 byelection loss that the government's tune changed.

"We heard at the door that hydro rates are increasingly challenging for people," Premier Kathleen Wynne said in a statement that night. "I understand, as do my ministers, that the government needs to focus on helping people with their everyday expenses."

The inclusion of the eight-per-cent rebate in the government's throne speech less than two weeks later suggests the plan was already well developed by Sept. 1. But the premier has acknowledged she should have acted sooner, a spokeswoman said.

"In saying that, we have been making changes to reduce costs in the electricity system over the past number of years," Jenn Beaudry said in a statement.

Changes she cited that were enacted before that eight-per-cent rebate include removing the debt retirement charge, reducing feed-in-tariff prices, renegotiating a green energy deal with Samsung, deferring new nuclear construction and delaying the start of other nuclear refurbishment, all of which saves the system billions.

While Wynne's eight-per-cent rebate was welcomed — almost 90 per cent of respondents in October supported it — it didn't resonate quite as widely as the government likely hoped. Still only 36 per cent said the government was doing a good job of controlling electricity prices.

"Of utmost importance to Ontarians for government's attention is electricity costs," the polling research said.

"And, evaluations of the government's performance at controlling electricity prices are worsening. Those who report being more familiar with government's recent eight-per-cent reduction of electricity prices are also more likely to evaluate the government poorly on this issue. Essentially, the solution is not proportionate to the perceived magnitude of the problem."

Fast-forward to March 2017 and the premier announced a further 17-per-cent average reduction on bills, holding increases to the rate of inflation for four years, cuts to delivery charges for some rural customers, eliminating the delivery charge for on-reserve First Nations customers, expanding a low-income support program and establishing a new home energy efficiency improvement fund.

Angus Reid polling conducted after that announcement found that Wynne's popularity continued to plummet to record lows, but 62 per cent of respondents said the reduction in hydro bills would be an important factor in deciding how they'll vote in next year's election.

The polling was conducted until October 2015 by Pollara, and from then on by the Gandalf Group.

SaultOnline.NDPS: KRMPTICH HEARING ALL ABOUT SKYROCKETING HYDRO BILLS ON THE DOORSTEP

By: Content Team
March 27, 2017

<http://saultonline.com/2017/03/ndps-krmpotich-hearing-all-about-skyrocketing-hydro-bills-on-the-doorstep/>

City Councillor Joe Krmpotich, the NDP candidate in the upcoming Sault. Ste. Marie by-election, says the concern he hears most often when he is out talking to people in his community is their skyrocketing hydro bills.

"Nearly every day, I talk to someone who has a hydro horror story," said Krmpotich on Monday. "Last week, I spoke with the Campbells. They're seniors, and their bill has gone up to \$350 a month. They are on a fixed income – how does Premier Wynne expect this couple to get by? Does she understand the value of \$350 to a couple on a fixed pension? And why won't the Conservatives say what they'd do about sky-high hydro bills?" Margaret and Wilmuir Campbell told Krmpotich that they have done everything they can to keep bills down. They even try hard to avoid using appliance and lights during peak hours, but it never seems to be enough – and the bills just keep getting bigger.

“My hydro bill is too high and the supposed plan that the Liberals have come up with is nowhere to be seen,” said Mr. Campbell. “I say, their plan is what got us in this mess in the first place. My wife and I are elderly, and we only have a certain amount of money per month to live on – keeping up with our hydro bill really hurts our finances.”

Krmpotich also spoke to Jamie LaCross while out canvassing last week. Jamie is a mom of two who told him that she has completely shut off the electric heat in her home, and is now keeping the house livable using propane heaters.

That’s because LaCross’ hydro bills had gotten up to a whopping \$1,200 per month, she said.

“People like Jamie are doing their best to make a good life for their little ones right here in the Sault,” said Krmpotich. “But Kathleen Wynne doesn’t get it. She’s using public dollars to run ads about hydro – but she’s not actually fixing the problem. For a mom like Jamie, that makes no sense.”

Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath asked the Liberal government today in question period what she was going to do to fix the mess she made in the hydro system. While Horwath has already released a complete plan to cut hydro rates, Premier Kathleen Wynne’s failure to take action means the Campbell and LaCross families have no idea if, or when, relief could come for them. The Conservatives also have no plan at all – but at one time supported the privatization of Hydro One.

The plan from Horwath and the NDP will cut hydro bills by as much as 30 per cent, and includes returning Hydro One to public hands – a move that will provide Ontario with an additional \$7 billion that can be invested in Ontario services. The NDP plan is in stark contrast to the Wynne government’s suggestion that they’ll use a band-aid borrowing scheme that will force people to pay \$40 billion more in interest to bankers.

TV Transcripts (Noon)

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