

Evening Media Scan: Hydro Rate Reduction - March 21, 2018

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MEDIA SCAN: HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

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Global News COMMENTARY: Doug Ford's common touch might outflank statist compassion

By: Tasha Kheiriddin
March 21, 2018 10:27 am

<https://globalnews.ca/news/4095126/tasha-kheiriddin-doug-ford-can-outflank-kathleen-wynne/>

"I'm from the government, and I'm here to help." Those are the most terrifying words in the English language, according to the late U.S. president Ronald Reagan – but then he never met Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne.

In this week's Throne Speech, Wynne promised not just to help – but to care. "Care is all around us. ... In the way a teacher sings the alphabet. In the way a nurse shows compassion for a fearful patient. ... As the changing economy widens the gaps in our society, your government has a plan for care and opportunity." Hence, her promises of free prescription drugs, cheaper child care, means-tested post-secondary education, higher minimum wages, more home care, and combating climate change for future generations. From the cradle to beyond the grave, the Liberals propose to swaddle voters in a cocoon of statist compassion.

Why this emphasis on caring? For the past year, Wynne has talked ceaselessly about being fair: fair hydro, fair workplaces, fair wages. "I will never back down from my commitment to a \$15 minimum wage because everyone in Ontario deserves a fair day's pay for a fair day's work," she told the Tim Horton's franchisee who dared cut his employees' free coffee breaks this past January. "A fair, open trade relationship is essential for jobs and growth in the U.S. and at home in Ontario," she tweeted in February. The word "fair" appeared in legislation, in speeches, in advertising. So why is "fair" suddenly out, and "care" in?

In two words, Doug Ford. Somewhere, some focus group or Liberal brain trust pegged "caring" as Ford's weak spot. If rival Christine Elliott had won the PC leadership, "care" would likely not be the Liberals' mantra: good luck accusing a woman who founded a centre for the disabled and advocated for sick people of not caring. But Ford! He's a tax fighter! A businessman! Heck – he's a man! Let 'er rip.

But if Monday night's PC rally in Etobicoke is any indication, Wynne may have bet on the wrong word. The Ford who took the stage in front of 2,000 supporters did not come across as uncaring. Bombastic, yes, when he promised the PCs will form "the largest majority this province has ever seen." Money-minded, when he intoned that "Kathleen wrote a lot of cheques with the taxpayer's bank account." And hokey, when he promised to develop the Ring of Fire "if I have to hop on a bulldozer myself."

Ford is what politicians call a HOAG – a Hell Of A Guy. He's the guy you can have a beer with, the guy without pretensions, the guy who will take your call when you need help. HOAGs are an old breed in politics – former Ontario premier Mike Harris was a HOAG, the late Alberta Ralph Klein was a HOAG, even former Prime Minister Jean Chretien — "le p'tit gars de Shawinigan" — was a HOAG. HOAGs do well when running against "elites," which is exactly how Ford positioned himself in the leadership – and which he will continue to do running against Wynne.

Personality differences aside, Wynne's pledge to care is also easy to refute. Ford just has to say that the reason people need someone to care for them is because of the mismanagement of successive Liberal governments. In effect, Wynne is running against herself – if the government cares so much, why is it only caring now? Where has it been the last 15 years? Answer: presiding over skyrocketing hydro rates, rising tax burden, and overcrowded hospitals.

The talking points on this are absurdly easy. The Liberals had a chance to do a lot of caring in that time, but instead wasted billions of dollars on cancelled gas plants and overpriced green energy contracts. They

capitulated in contract negotiations with public sector employees to curry favour with the union vote. They spawned a series of scandals, from eHealth to ORNG to party fundraising, which further eroded public trust – and which belie their new “caring” approach.

Finally, Ford can say that he will care – just in a different way. Rather than use the levers of government to care for people, he can argue that he trusts the “little platoons” of society – the family, the neighborhood association, the church, the mosque, the girl scouts. In short, the issue won’t be that the Liberals care and the PCs don’t – it will be: what is the best way to care? Top down, or bottom up? For a guy who eschews elites and hundred-dollar words, Ford might end up fighting the most philosophical election the province has seen in decades. And the Liberals might need to speak a new language.

Tasha Kheiriddin can be heard between noon and 2 p.m. ET on Global News Radio 640 Toronto. She’s also a columnist with Global News and iPolitics.ca, where this piece first appeared.

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