

Morning Media Scan: Hydro Rate Reduction Plan - May 26, 2017

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***updated with Hydro Scan attached**

Morning Media Scan: May 26, 2017

MEDIA SCAN: HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

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Print Coverage

Toronto Star: Wynne defends hydro rate cut despite watchdog's warning; Premier says \$21-billion hit will give consumers the relief they've demanded, deserved; A3; 2017.05.26

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ILLUSTRATION: Kathleen Wynne said the costs of infrastructure improvements "were on the shoulders of people today." René Johnston/Toronto Star

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Wynne defends hydro rate cut despite watchdog's warning; Premier says \$21-billion hit will give consumers the relief they've demanded, deserved

Premier Kathleen Wynne is making no apologies for the Liberals' 25-per-cent hydro rate cuts that a legislative watchdog warns will cost at least \$21 billion over three decades.

In the wake of Financial Accountability Officer Stephen LeClair's report on the "Fair Hydro Plan," Wynne emphasized that Ontario electricity consumers demanded and deserved relief.

"You all read the newspaper, you listen to the radio and you watch television - you know the problems that families are having around the province paying for their electricity costs," the premier told reporters Thursday in Timmins, Ont.

That's why the government moved forward with a rate cut that will see the average household's monthly hydro bill drop from \$156 to \$123 once it fully takes effect next month.

In a 15-page report released Wednesday, the financial accountability officer estimated the initiative would cost the province \$45 billion over the next 29 years while saving ratepayers \$24 billion for a net expense of \$21 billion.

Both the Progressive Conservatives and the New Democrats oppose the Liberal rate cut.

But Wynne said the government has in effect renegotiated a mortgage so it will bankroll hydro infrastructure improvements over a longer time period in order to give customers a break now.

"We're talking about a 30-year window here. It took at least 30 years, probably 40 years, to let the electricity system degrade to the stage that it had in 2003," she said, noting "we were having blackouts and brownouts around the province" before her party took office that year.

"There were thousands of kilometres of line that needed to be rebuilt ... that work hadn't been done over those generations, so electricity costs were low over that period of time but the work wasn't being done."

When her predecessor Dalton McGuinty came to power in 2003, Wynne said Queen's Park began spending billions on infrastructure improvements, including expensive subsidies for green energy, such as wind turbines and solar panels.

"There's a lot of work that has been done since then.

"Literally thousands of kilometres of line have been rebuilt.

"The coal-fired plants have been shut down. The air is cleaner. There's less pollution in the air. The system is reliable and renewable," she said.

"So there's a cost associated with that and what was happening was that was work that had to be done - and all of those costs were on the shoulders of people today."

Wynne noted "this electricity grid is an asset that is going to be used for generations to come."

"My grandchildren are going to benefit from this asset, so I think it's fair that we spread the cost of that over that 30-year period," she said.

"That's how we made this decision."

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Toronto Sun: Wynne's hydro fix: Debt and more debt; A18; 2017.05.26

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Wynne's hydro fix: Debt and more debt

If any one financial blunder sums up 14 years of Liberal rule in Ontario, it's Premier Kathleen Wynne's, ahem, "Fair Hydro Plan".

That's because the same Liberal government that made Ontario the most indebted sub-sovereign borrower in the world, is now trying to solve its biggest political problem, soaring electricity rates, by taking on more debt.

Wynne's \$45-billion plan to give hydro ratepayers a \$24 billion temporary reprieve on their electricity bills, will cost Ontarians \$21 billion over three decades, according to Financial Accountability Officer Stephen LeClair.

But that's only if the Ontario government can maintain a balanced budget for 29 years, which is never going to happen, given Ontario's fiscal track record.

If, as will inevitably happen, future governments have to take on more debt to finance the \$21 billion cost of Wynne's plan, then, LeClair warns, the final cost to taxpayers could soar from \$45 billion to as high as \$93 billion, depending on interest rates.

But it gets worse. As LeClair notes: "The government's electricity cost refinancing initiative involves a complicated accounting structure that will increase gross debt by approximately \$26 billion by 2027-28, but does not impact the Province's net debt due to the creation of a regulatory/investment asset. If the creation of (this) asset does not meet with public sector accounting standards, then the Province's annual surplus/deficit would deteriorate by a total of \$26 billion over the next 11 years ...

"The Financial Accountability Office recommends MPPs obtain assurance from the Office of the Auditor General that the Province's proposed accounting treatment will not impact the Province's annual surplus/deficit and net debt."

If that statement inspires confidence in you about how Wynne's plan is going to roll out over the next 30 years, we have some ocean front property in Alberta to sell you.

Once again, the Liberals are pretending there's a free lunch.

That is, that you can ignore public debt by shifting it off the government's books into a newly created account overseen by a newly created agency, and that there will never be a day of reckoning when you have to pay it back, with interest.

We can't afford this Liberal "logic" any longer.

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The Globe and Mail: Don't let Ontario sell you on its hydro 'savings' plan ;; B4;
2017.05.26

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Don't let Ontario sell you on its hydro 'savings' plan ;

Staff

Ontario's error-prone energy policy makers are at it again with a scheme to fudge paying for their previous mistakes that will end up costing consumers nearly twice as much over time.

In order to pocket \$24-billion in "savings" on their electricity bill over the next decade under the Liberal government's deceptively named Fair Hydro Plan, consumers will pay at least \$45-billion starting in 2028. "After 10 years," says Ontario's Financial Accountability Officer, Stephen LeClair, "ratepayers will be required to pay the deferred electricity costs plus approximately \$21-billion in interest, which result in higher electricity bills than under the status quo."

So, unless you're planning on living off the grid in Algonquin Park or moving out of the province by 2028, you will be materially worse off under the FHP than had the Liberals just left bad enough alone. And that's only if the government doesn't muck anything else up along the way.

Big if. In 14 years in office, the Liberals have mangled the energy file so many times, it would be naive to think they can't possibly do it again. For every good decision they've made – such as closing the province's coal plants – they've made several more bad ones that needlessly drove up costs.

Even the coal phase-out was hastily executed to meet a political deadline. So, instead of thinking through how best to replace coal capacity, the Liberals rushed to build new gas-fired generation plants and refurbish aging nuclear reactors at a cost of billions. Then, also for political reasons, they rushed to spend

billions more on superfluous wind and solar power projects.

The result is that, though Ontario's nuclear power plants accounted for 36 per cent of the province's electrical-generating capacity in 2016, they ran full steam and provided 61 per cent of its power last year. Gas plants, usually only run during peak consumption hours, accounted for 28 per cent of capacity, but only 9 per cent of the electricity that was actually produced.

More than a third of the wind power that was produced was unusable in Ontario, either exported to the United States at a loss or "dispatched." The latter occurs when the grid operator stops delivery of wind power even though producers are often still paid for the power under contracts signed by the Liberals. Usable solar power accounted for a meaningless share of the province's electricity consumption. Yet, all this surplus wind and solar power contributes to lower overall market prices for electricity, creating the massive gap between what Ontarians pay for power and what it is actually worth on the open market. Now, Premier Kathleen Wynne's government is touting powersharing deals with Quebec to further reduce the use of gas-fired electricity during peak hours, making these costly gas plants even more redundant. And antinuke groups such as the Ontario Clean Air Alliance want to import yet more Quebec hydro power in order to shutter the Pickering nuclear plant in 2018, instead of 2024 as planned, and scrap the \$13-billion refurbishment of the Darlington nuclear station.

Unfortunately, the time to have planned for more Quebec imports was a decade ago, before phasing out coal, building gas plants and signing long-term contracts to procure wind and solar power under the Green Energy Act. It would have taken that much time to upgrade existing transmission links with Quebec, build new ones and allow for Hydro-Québec to set aside capacity to supply Ontario. Doing so now would merely add new costs to those Ontarians must already bear.

This is confirmed in a technical report released this month by Ontario's Independent Electricity System Operator that concludes it would take up to seven years and about \$250-million just to upgrade current interprovincial transmission links in order to reliably import a "firm" 2,000 megawatts from Quebec.

Boosting total imports by a further 2,000 MW would require at least 10 years of planning and construction to build an entirely new transmission link – at a cost of \$1.4-billion – on top of the amount Hydro-Québec would have to spend to build additional generating capacity to supply Ontario, whose peak consumption tops 23,000 MW in the summer.

Quebec power might have proved a cost-effective, low-carbon option had it been secured years ago. Now, it will be far pricier, as Hydro-Québec would charge Ontario at least its marginal cost of production for new hydro capacity, which is far higher today than it was in 2007.

Such a plan would also run up against local opposition to a new transmission line through the Ottawa suburbs – building new transmission lines is almost as hard these days as building new oil pipelines. Besides, enough power from Quebec would not be available soon enough to allow for an earlier shutdown of Pickering. As for Darlington, the choice is between refurbishing or decommissioning. Neither comes cheap.

Remember this all the next time the Liberals take credit for cutting your electricity bill.

Daily Observer (Pembroke): Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A5; 2017.05.26

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Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?

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its dominant stride in January or February, but then things fall apart in April when the playoffs approach. Whatever the causes, it's just bad timing.

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That could be changing. Recent polls have shown the Liberals climbing, including one last week by Campaign Research (a conservative-connected firm) that even showed the Liberals slightly ahead of the PCs.

It helps that the budget is balanced.

It's not so much that voters care deeply about deficits; it's that it allows the government to afford lofty new projects again. This past budget gave us a limited form of pharmacare, and in the following weeks Wynne promised new jails for Ottawa and Thunder Bay and a \$21-billion highspeed rail line for Southwestern Ontario. Get ready for a lot more of this by next spring.

Trouble still looms, of course. The financial accountability officer put out a report this week showing the ugly future of the hydro relief plan, with ratepayers shelling out as much as \$21 billion extra over the long term to afford the short-term reductions (enough money, as it happens, to have funded that high-speed rail line.) Hydro relief was never going to be free, and everyone was demanding it, but this is pretty damn painful.

Even worse, two separate trials (one involving computer-wiping allegations, another related to the Sudbury byelection scandal) of former high-ranking Liberal operatives are set to start in the fall, and all kinds of nasty revelations could emerge.

But the Liberals are starting to claw their way back into contention - and they're getting help. The PCs continue to lurch from controversy to controversy over their nominations, with candidates all over the province furiously alleging manipulation from party brass to get their preferred choice. Patrick Brown's been at war with factions of his party's base for the entire time he's been leader, and there remains little reason to be confident he can put together a platform that appeals to both the PC membership and the general population.

Meanwhile, the highest-profile New Democrat MPP has just ditched his provincial colleagues to run for the federal party's leadership. Jagmeet Singh hasn't resigned his Queen's Park seat, so he could be back by the election if he loses. But while the NDP have done a good job developing policy, including a pharmacare proposal and their own hydro relief plan, they've been chronically unable to take advantage of Wynne's unpopularity. And the government's next big policy rollout is a package of left-leaning labour reforms that will once again steal much of the NDP's thunder.

It's too soon to call it momentum, and a lot could still go wrong. But for the first time in a while, the Liberals seem to have a glint of hope. If you're their opponent, you didn't think this was going to be easy, did you?
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The Brockville Recorder & Times: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A6; 2017.05.26

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Woodstock Sentinel-Review: Can wynne liberals claw way back to contention?; A4; 2017.05.26

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Sudbury Star: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A10; 2017.05.26

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St. Catharines Standard: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4;
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Sarnia Observer: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4; 2017.05.26

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Niagara Falls Review: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4;
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The Chatham Daily News: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4; 2017.05.26

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Brantford Expositor: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4;
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The Sault Star: Ontario economic report; A1 / Front; 2017.05.26

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Ontario economic report

Confidence in Ontario's economy is waning, states the Ontario Chamber of Commerce in its annual economic report.
While nearly two-thirds of members are confident in their own organization's economic outlook only 24 per cent of Ontario Chamber of Commerce members have confidence in the province's economic outlook. Concerns about the lack of confidence centre around the increasing price of raw materials, electricity and other business costs, the report, released to a small group of Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce members Thursday, indicates.
The Ontario Economic Report is the first of its kind produced by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce and is set to be produced annually to chart growth and prosperity in the province. It's based on a broad-ranging membership survey and designed to be a 'snapshot' of the year ahead.
The business confidence survey shows that businesses are 'cautiously optimistic' about their own economic future but less so about that of the province.
"Despite projections that Ontario will lead Canada in economic growth in the coming years, diminished profitability, lower labour market participation, and sluggish market activity, along with other key factors, have resulted in a risk-averse atmosphere in which businesses are disinclined to grow production," Allan O'Dette, president and CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce says in his summary of the report.
Kale Baldauf, vice president of the Ontario chamber's policy and government relations, told the breakfast meeting that the membership survey results indicate that while more than three quarters of Chamber members expect to maintain or increase their revenue over the next year, it is medium and large size organizations that are more likely to expect their organization's revenue to increase during that same time period.
The Chamber is concerned that small businesses, which are the cornerstone of the economy, are less likely to foresee growth in revenue and workforce.
In addition, he said, businesses that have a lack of confidence in the economy in general often weakens and negatively impacts business willingness to invest, hire or grow, he said.
The survey also shows that it's smaller businesses who do not expect to grow their revenue over the next year, while medium and larger organizations are more confident that their revenue will either increase or stay the same.
"It's concerning that one in five (businesses) expect revenues to decrease in the year ahead," Baldauf said. "That's massive and indicates times of slow growth ahead."
Baldauf said the survey produced some surprising results to the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

Completed earlier this spring, the survey showed that Hydro was not the number one issue for businesses. Instead, acquiring qualified staff was the top issue.

He analyzes the results by suggesting that while electricity costs are a concern, businesses are aware that the provincial government has announced a program designed to curb those costs.

"The issue has been tempered in recent months with the announcement of the Ontario Fair Hydro Plan," Baldauf said. "We were reaching a crisis when this happened. We are happy something has been done." Instead, the most pressing issue identified by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce is the need to find suitable labour to staff the organizations.

Local businesses were told that transitioning people from school to the workforce needs to be better examined and growth in internship plans need to be promoted.

The Ontario Chamber hopes that it can work with government and find solutions that will help businesses develop the skilled workforce that they need and has adapted it as one of its top three priorities for 2017. It's other priorities will include ensuring that a healthier workplace exists with a continued public health care system for all, Baldauf said.

The Ontario Chamber will also focus on business needs relating to the environment and infrastructure are also front and centre with both the provincial and federal government.

While massive amounts of money are being injected in infrastructure, both governments have their plans to incentivize a transition to a lowcarbon economy.

"From the perspective of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, these initiatives present the province with a critical opportunity to set the foundations for a long-term, sustainable economic growth and prosperity" but the need to slow down and get programming right is imperative, the report advocates.

The overall economic outlook for the Northeastern Ontario region for the year shows an unemployment rate will be maintained at about 6.7 per cent with the forecasted outmigration of another 1,100 people. The residential median price is expected to be about \$193,000.

With its first attempt at developing a business prosperity index (BPI), designed to look beyond GDP and consider wealth generation from business production and investment activities, the Ontario Chamber of Commerce has concerns.

Factoring in all the components, the BPI has been calculated at 48.5 per cent, which means businesses tend to use about 51.5 per cent of their resources to conduct business activities, leaving the remaining amounts for other purposes such as investing in new capital, paying dividends and repurchasing share capital.

"The BPI is currently near a 15-year high but this is not an indication of prosperity, it's one of a perception of fewer opportunities and higher risk which has led to a preference for the maintenance of operations rather than growth," the business sector was told.

Baldauf said the statistic doesn't reflect what businesses are making, but instead how they are moving their money around.

"Tremendous vulnerabilities exist here and it's not sustainable," he said. "There is reason for optimism and reason for concern and we need to be vigilant conveying that to Queen's Park."

Baldauf said the report is designed to be a platform to articulate issues businesses across Ontario are facing and hope the government uses the report as a tool when making its policy and legislative decisions. Both Liberal candidate Debbie Amaroso and NDP candidate Joe Krmpotich attended the session and were to meet with Baldauf later. Conservative candidate Ross Romano was said to have another engagement, but was also to meet with Baldauf.

Amaroso said she found the priorities of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce and noted that the problem is very aligned with the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce.

Skill development and transitioning youth from schools to workplaces align with the Liberal government's concept of internship and go hand in hand with the notion of free tuition.

"It was pleasing to see that the alignment also exists to the priority of the of environment and infrastructure with the \$30-million investment in infrastructure programs," she said.

Amaroso believes the survey results shows the energy challenge is not top of mind for people in this community and the issue has been addressed with the new program in place.

"It's not top of mind with people and businesses. The government is showing its responsiveness to the needs of business and the people of Ontario," she said.

Krmpotich said he also found the report interesting.

"It shows how critical the infrastructure is in Northern Ontario and parts of Sault Ste. Marie," he said. "It's also important that we're making sure a smelter production plant is critical for our area to create jobs now and for future generations."

Krmpotich said it's important to understand about sustainability and vulnerabilities and how best to move the economy forward.

He said the NDP will make sure the proper infrastructure is in place to grow jobs and the economy in the north region - and across Ontario - to ensure there are jobs for the next generation.

"We need to keep those 3,000 jobs with Essar Steel Algoma in the Sault and make sure that OLG jobs are not going south," he said. "That's a big concern."

Romano said that his conversation with Baldauf centred on the need to cut red tape, improve

infrastructure, reduce hydro costs and educate youth on where the future jobs are. Romano said he hasn't been able to review the report in detail yet, but remains concerned about the North and the need to develop infrastructure, especially in light of the Ring of Fire development. Romano said that trades classes need to be reincorporated in the educational system to help those students who want to work with their hands and to fill the gap of jobs that are available in the trades and various areas like the IT sector and engineering. While the Ontario Chamber said its members are concerned about raising minimum wage to \$15 for all employees - students included - the candidates agreed a balance between business and needs for a comfortable lifestyle need to be found. "You need to be open to the discussion and find a balance where people can find a comfortable living wage where their needs can be met and at the same time be sensitive to the needs of business," Amaroso said. "If businesses are failing because they can't meet the rising costs, then that puts us in a precarious situation too. You need to have an open mind," she said. Krmpotich said he's hearing young people are completing their education and often forced to move into precarious work with minimum wages, no benefits or pensions and that has to change. "You've got to strike fairness and a good balance and people should be able to make a good wage working 37.5 hours of work and increasing the minimum wage to \$15, I totally agree with it," he said. Romano said that the discussion has to be part of the review of the minimum wage report and he hopes to be part of it. "I'm content to see wages increase with the rate of inflation, but certainly we are open to listening to all good ideas and at the end of the day, if it's good for Ontario, I look forward to supporting it."

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Peterborough Examiner: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4; 2017.05.26

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Tillsonburg News: Ontario's hydro plan terrible public policy; A4; 2017.05.26

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Ontario's hydro plan terrible public policy

The jiggery-pokery the Ontario Liberals are using to cut hydro bills will eventually cost us almost twice as much as it saves, the budget watchdog reported Wednesday.

This is the "Fair Hydro Plan," the Liberals' answer to the constant drumbeat of "hydro, hydro, hydro" from the opposition. It cuts electricity prices by 25 per cent for residential and small commercial customers now, and the future is the future's problem.

The metaphor the government is using is that it's refinancing the mortgage on the electricity system, extending the payments on long-term energy contracts to lower prices now. Refinancing isn't free, though,

and the financial accountability officer Stephen LeClair and his staff say it'll save us \$24 billion on our hydro bills now but cost us \$45 billion in the end.

That money will go to lenders, who'll put up the money to cover the costs of the energy contracts as signed and then accept our extra payments over a decade or so. The whole thing will be managed through the government-owned Ontario Power Generation utility, which keeps it off the province's books.

The provincial government will also forgo about \$1.5 billion a year in sales taxes on electricity, the report says, leaving the money in Ontarians' pockets. Assuming the government never runs a deficit that forces it to borrow, there's no net cost to that. That's an iffy assumption, obviously.

By 2027, the budget officer figures, electricity prices will be four per cent higher than they would otherwise. What makes the plan "fair," Wynne said, is that it makes future Ontarians pay more and today's Ontarians pay less. What was unfair before, in Wynne's formulation, was today's Ontarians were having to pay too big a share of the costs of modernizing the power system when tomorrow's Ontarians will also benefit.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault responded to LeClair's report by acknowledging it's accurate but there'll be a plan released this summer that lowers long-term expenses by reducing the amount of electricity we expect to buy. There's evidence Ontario won't need as much power as the operative plan calls for.

What would actually be fair would be to go back in time and make the Ontarians of the 1970s, '80s and '90s pay a little bit more for electricity to keep the system in good repair. Power, in the glory days, was unsustainably cheap.

Yes, part of what we're paying for now is ill-considered green-energy contracts. Part of it is from ditching dirty coal generation, which was a wiser decision but not a free one.

A lot of what we're paying for is simply dragging Ontario Hydro back from the brink of collapse. Decades of self-indulgence achieved that decrepitude and decades of self-discipline are the only way to undo it.

The Fair Hydro Plan is the Liberals' declaration that we're not quite up to the self-discipline they thought we were. The Fair Hydro Plan addresses a big political problem for the governing party but it's terrible public policy. It exemplifies the attitude that got us into trouble in the first place.

The opposition parties have no meaningful alternatives.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown promises to review generating contracts to look for loopholes, as if the Liberals hadn't thought of that. NDP Leader Andrea Horwath says an NDP government would buy back Hydro One, the sale of which has basically nothing to do with electricity prices. Each party's plan has other elements but at most they amount to fiddling the decimals.

So Ontario's electricity prices are high and in complaining about them with Trumpian vapidly, the opposition parties have stampeded the government into buying temporary relief by making them much higher than they'd have to be if we just gutted the next few years out.

Well done, everybody.

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Times-Journal (St.Thomas): Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A7;
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Ottawa Citizen: Are the Liberals on a comeback in Ontario?; A8; 2017.05.26

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Owen Sound Sun Times: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4;
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Ontario's hydro plan terrible public policy

The jiggery-pokery the Ontario Liberals are using to cut hydro bills will eventually cost us almost twice as much as it saves, the budget watchdog reported Wednesday.

This is the "Fair Hydro Plan," the Liberals' answer to the constant drumbeat of "hydro, hydro, hydro" from the opposition. It cuts electricity prices by 25 per cent for residential and small commercial customers now, and the future is the future's problem.

The metaphor the government is using is that it's refinancing the mortgage on the electricity system, extending the payments on long-term energy contracts to lower prices now. Refinancing isn't free, though, and the financial accountability officer Stephen LeClair and his staff say it'll save us \$24 billion on our hydro bills now but cost us \$45 billion in the end.

That money will go to lenders, who'll put up the money to cover the costs of the energy contracts as signed and then accept our extra payments over a decade or so. The whole thing will be managed through the government-owned Ontario Power Generation utility, which keeps it off the province's books.

The provincial government will also forgo about \$1.5 billion a year in sales taxes on electricity, the report says, leaving the money in Ontarians' pockets. Assuming the government never runs a deficit that forces it to borrow, there's no net cost to that. That's an iffy assumption, obviously.

By 2027, the budget officer figures, electricity prices will be four per cent higher than they would otherwise. What makes the plan "fair," Wynne said, is that it makes future Ontarians pay more and today's Ontarians pay less. What was unfair before, in Wynne's formulation, was today's Ontarians were having to pay too big a share of the costs of modernizing the power system when tomorrow's Ontarians will also benefit.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault responded to LeClair's report by acknowledging it's accurate but there'll be a plan released this summer that lowers long-term expenses by reducing the amount of electricity we expect to buy. There's evidence Ontario won't need as much power as the operative plan calls for.

What would actually be fair would be to go back in time and make the Ontarians of the 1970s, '80s and '90s pay a little bit more for electricity to keep the system in good repair. Power, in the glory days, was unsustainably cheap.

Yes, part of what we're paying for now is ill-considered green-energy contracts. Part of it is from ditching dirty coal generation, which was a wiser decision but not a free one.

A lot of what we're paying for is simply dragging Ontario Hydro back from the brink of collapse. Decades of self-indulgence achieved that decrepitude and decades of self-discipline are the only way to undo it.

The Fair Hydro Plan is the Liberals' declaration that we're not quite up to the self-discipline they thought we were. The Fair Hydro Plan addresses a big political problem for the governing party but it's terrible public policy. It exemplifies the attitude that got us into trouble in the first place.

The opposition parties have no meaningful alternatives.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown promises to review generating contracts to look for loopholes, as if the Liberals hadn't thought of that. NDP Leader Andrea Horwath says an NDP government would buy back Hydro One, the sale of which has basically nothing to do with electricity prices. Each party's plan has other elements but at most they amount to fiddling the decimals.

So Ontario's electricity prices are high and in complaining about them with Trumpian vapidly, the opposition parties have stampeded the government into buying temporary relief by making them much higher than they'd have to be if we just gutted the next few years out.

Well done, everybody.

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London Free Press: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A7;
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Northern Daily News (Kirkland Lake): Premier visits KL; Kathleen Wynne focuses on health care during stop; A1 / Front; 2017.05.26

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BYLINE: Brad Sherratt

SOURCE: Northern News

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ILLUSTRATION: Brad Sherratt - Northern News / Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne paid a visit to Kirkland Lake Wednesday. While in town she visited the Kirkland and District Hospital. In the photo are, from left, Ottawa-Vanier MPP Nathalie Des Rosiers, hospital president and CEO Gary Sims, Premier Wynne, Kirkland Lake Mayor Tony Antoniazzi and Dr. Mark Spiller.; / Kirkland and District Hospital President and C.E.O. Gary Sims; / Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne;

DATELINE: KIRKLAND LAKE

WORD COUNT: 998

Premier visits KL; Kathleen Wynne focuses on health care during stop

Premier Kathleen Wynne said increases to health care funding and the new prescription drug plan announced in the new provincial budget will benefit Kirkland Lakes and all Ontarians.

The premier visited the area on Wednesday, touring Kirkland and District Hospital before journeying out to Matachewan First Nation.

The Premier's remarks at the hospital focused on the recent budget. She touched on several areas and how she feels they will positively impact the north.

"I'm happy to talk about how our health care plan is going to be able to deliver faster access to health care services across the north.," she said. "It includes the OHIP plus (the government's new prescription drug plan), but we are also increasing hospital operating budgets, So it means the Kirkland and District hospital and all hospitals in Ontario will be able to provide a better environment for both patients and staff. They will see a minimum of a two per cent increase across the system and a three percent increase in hospital budgets. That investment will help to reduce wait times across Ontario so that means that we will see seniors getting surgeries sooner and getting access to their local health support during their recovery. We also heard very clearly the Northern Ontario travel grant was not adequate. We are increasing that. We are putting \$10 million into the Northern Ontario travel grant which will mean that more people will be able to access that support."

In an interview with Northern News following her speech, Wynne was asked about the cancellation of the Northlander train service and the changes to the bus schedules, and how that plays into people getting better access to health care in the south. She didn't address the passenger train service specifically, but said the issue of transportation in the north is being studied.

"We are working on a multimodal strategy for the north," she said. Certainly the ONTC was and is part of

that but I want to make sure we are working with the coach lines. We've got a situation where we had a better system in the northeast than in the northwest and I want to see us have a northern multi-modal transportation strategy so that means ONTC, it means buses, it means coach lines so the Minister of Transportation is working on that as we speak."

As for what kind of model they are looking at the Premier stated it comes down to a question of "who are going to be the carriers of the routes that have either been abandoned or where there isn't enough traffic and they are at risk of being abandoned. That is one of the challenges. I want to make sure we have the right regulation in place. There has been a lot of talk for years about re-regulation or deregulation of the coach industry so there could be different kinds of vehicles and that is some of the stuff the Minister (is looking at)."

Wynne added the matter is being looked at it now.

Kirkland and District Hospital president and Chief Executive Officer Gary Sims said it was a thrill to have the Premier visit the hospital and feels it was positive recognition of the work the staff does on a daily basis.

"It's wonderful to get recognized and having the Premier hear means recognition of the work we do and it is a pleasure to have somebody come from so high in the government and recognize the good work, and to promote what the hospital is doing."

As for the increase in funding, Sims feels it is very important.

"It's tight. We have had some tough times. We have had several years of almost no increases at all, one per-cent, which puts us behind every year. However we do welcome the recognition. That two per cent is the minimum that we need. We know obviously lobby and work with the government and the LHIN (Local Health Integration Network) to try to leverage multiyear funding and of course I think the OHA (Ontario Hospital Association) put in for over four per cent and that is where I think we could really grow and develop."

Wynne was also very impressed with the hospital's hospice beds.

"There are really good ideas in northern communities. I (in her speech) pointed to the hospice beds. That is something we need to make sure everyone across the province, particularly in rural communities, even in the south, know that is happening because it is a really good idea. The Northeast LHIN have done a very good thing in supporting those."

During her presentation Wynne also spoke about Ontario Hydro and during her interview with the Northern News, she stated how important the changes will be to those of use in the north.

"Everyone is a residential ratepayer across the province across the province will see, on average, a 25 per cent reduction by summer. People who live in the rural and more remote areas, Hydro One, R1 and R2 customers as well as some higher paying remote distribution areas will see up to a 40 to 50 per cent reduction because we're going to reduce the distribution costs. That is what I really heard from northern folk is that those distribution costs could be higher than the electricity they actually used or just as high as the electricity as they use. That is not right. There should be some more evenness across the system."

Kirkland Lake Mayor Tony Antoniazzi was also on hand for the event.

"It is certainly always an honour to welcome Premier Wynne to our community. Since I have been Mayor it's her second trip to Kirkland Lake. She brought some good news, not new news. Increasing the travel grant and looking at ways of doing things differently."

After the event at the hospital Antoniazzi had a private meeting with the Premier. After that she travelled to Matachewan where she met members of the Matachewan First Nation before heading on to Timmins.

Kingston Whig-Standard: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; A4; 2017.05.26

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Collingwood Enterprise-Bulletin: Ontario's hydro plan terrible public policy; A4;
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The Barrie Examiner: Can Wynne Liberals claw way back to contention?; C2;
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If you're a sports fan, you'll know the concept of peaking too early. A hockey team, for example, might hit its dominant stride in January or February, but then things fall apart in April when the playoffs approach. Whatever the causes, it's just bad timing.

Is this happening in Ontario politics? Over the past year, the governing Liberals were decimated in the polls, particularly over the hydro issue, and would have been in huge trouble in an election. But with the general election not scheduled until June 2018, I'd be wondering if I was a Progressive Conservative or New Democrat: Did we peak too soon? By the usual economic indicators, the Liberals should not be wallowing in or around third place in the polls as they have been. Though it's not quite booming, Ontario's economic growth is at the front of the pack among Canadian provinces. In April, the unemployment rate dropped to 5.8 per cent, the lowest it's been since 2001. Yet it seemed that electricity rates, Premier Kathleen Wynne's personal unpopularity and general voter fatigue with the party might be too much to overcome.

That could be changing. Recent polls have shown the Liberals climbing, including one last week by Campaign Research (a conservative-connected firm) that even showed the Liberals slightly ahead of the PCs.

It helps that the budget is balanced.

It's not so much that voters care deeply about deficits; it's that it allows the government to afford lofty new projects again. This past budget gave us a limited form of pharmacare, and in the following weeks Wynne promised new jails for Ottawa and Thunder Bay and a \$21-billion high-speed rail line for Southwestern Ontario. Get ready for a lot more of this by next spring.

Trouble still looms, of course. The financial accountability officer put out a report this week showing the ugly future of the hydro relief plan, with ratepayers shelling out as much as \$21 billion extra over the long term to afford the short-term reductions (enough money, as it happens, to have funded that high-speed rail line.) Hydro relief was never going to be free, and everyone was demanding it, but this is pretty damn painful.

Even worse, two separate trials (one involving computer-wiping allegations, another related to the Sudbury byelection scandal) of former high-ranking Liberal operatives are set to start in the fall, and all kinds of nasty revelations could emerge.

But the Liberals are starting to claw their way back into contention - and they're getting help. The PCs continue to lurch from controversy to controversy over their nominations, with candidates all over the province furiously alleging manipulation from party brass to get their preferred choice. Patrick Brown's been at war with factions of his party's base for the entire time he's been leader, and there remains little reason to be confident he can put together a platform that appeals to both the PC membership and the general population.

Meanwhile, the highest-profile New Democrat MPP has just ditched his provincial colleagues to run for the federal party's leadership. Jagmeet Singh hasn't resigned his Queen's Park seat, so he could be back by the election if he loses. But while the NDP have done a good job developing policy, including a pharmacare proposal and their own hydro relief plan, they've been chronically unable to take advantage of Wynne's unpopularity. And the government's next big policy rollout is a package of left-leaning labour reforms that will once again steal much of the NDP's thunder.

It's too soon to call it momentum, and a lot could still go wrong. But for the first time in a while, the Liberals seem to have a glint of hope. If you're their opponent, you didn't think this was going to be easy, did you? bplatt@postmedia.com

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