

QP Briefing: March 27, 2018

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Q P B R I E F I N G

March 27, 2018

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Articles

1). As arbitration looms, OMA ramps up campaign, blaming Lib

By: Jessica Smith Cross

One big question mark for the government's upcoming budget is the outcome of binding arbitration with the Ontario Medical Association.

Just how many billions of dollars that question is worth is a matter of dispute.

At Queen's Park Tuesday, OMA president Shawn Whatley held a press conference to highlight its "Not a Second Longer" campaign, to draw attention to wait times in health care and, in the OMA's words, "to fight poor government decision-making."

The province's 40,000 doctors have been without a contract for four years and after failing to reach a mediated settlement are heading to binding arbitration in late May. The government maintains that the two sides are more than \$10 billion apart: the OMA's position would see the annual physician services budget increase by \$13 billion by 2020-21 — more than doubling it — while the government's position would increase it by \$3 billion in that time frame.

Whatley disputed those figures, but declined to give a more accurate answer.

He did, however, say the size of the physician services budget, from which doctors are paid, is at the core of the dispute.

A recent report by Ontario's Financial Accountability Office found that the government has largely targeted the health-care sector for fiscal restraint as it sought to regain control over its books during a slow recovery from the 2008-09 recession, with hospital budgets and physician compensation bearing the brunt of the austerity.

While the government has announced other major health-care spending initiatives in the lead-up to the budget, physician compensation will be decided later by arbitration — a process the OMA had been seeking for years and won last year only after a years-long standoff with the government and a high level of political engagement by groups of doctors, who took to the streets in protest of unilateral cuts to their fees.

Whatley made the case that paying doctors more will help reduce medical wait times.

"When it comes to physician remuneration, we need to keep Ontario attractive so we can draw top talent to Ontario to care for our sickest patients," he said.

"It's not only about that," he added. "It's about how the whole system functions."

The other major health-care funding announcements made in recent days include increasing operating funding for hospitals by \$822 million in 2018-19, increasing mental health care funding by \$2.1 billion over four years, and expanding OHIP+ free pharmacare to seniors at a cost of \$575 million over four years.

Meanwhile, the OMA is getting involved in the June election. While not supporting any one party, its "Not a Second Longer" campaign points the finger at the governing party for Ontarians' pain and suffering.

Its first commercial shows an elderly woman on a stretcher in a hallway crying with no medical staff nearby.

Then, a doctor blames the government, saying: "If this was difficult to watch for several seconds, imagine for several hours. Wait times in Ontario are increasing and it's the government's fault. In this upcoming election, let the government know that your health can't wait a second longer."

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2). Your Question Period briefing: The 'you get new care!' edition

By: David Hains

Order! It's time for your Question Period briefing

The main issue: PC parliamentary leader Vic Fedeli led with what he calls the "newest Liberal billion-dollar scandal" from the government, adding that it's a "real doozy."

It's the latest installment in the long-running accounting spat between the government and Auditor General, with Bonnie Lysyk saying that the financial treatment at the IESO for the Fair Hydro Plan is "bogus." Fedeli used his first few questions to ask about the concerns the AG raised, including not telling her when a board meeting for the IESO took place.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault defended the government record on the issue, citing several jurisdictions that use the same accounting treatments. He also said on more than one occasion that the IESO met with representatives from the AG's office more than 40 times, arguing that they were co-operative.

This isn't good enough for PC energy critic Todd Smith, who accuses the government of "skulduggery," on the file, which, as with "bogus," is a great word.

But Thibeault responded, again, that rate-regulated accounting practices are common, citing "Alberta, New England, New York, Michigan and Texas" as jurisdictions that practice it.

Other issues:

Andrea Horwath claimed that the TTC "is the most underfunded major transit agency in North America," which prompted groans of dissent from the government benches. While Horwath didn't go into the details of what she meant, she was likely referring to the fare-box recovery ratio, and by that metric Toronto does have the least subsidized major transit system in North America on a per-rider basis. She also demanded the province restore the long-abandoned 50-50 provincial-municipal operating subsidy for transit, which is unlikely to happen, unless the NDP wins in June.

Citing the Ontario Medical Association, PC health critic Jeff Yurek criticized the government's record on health, and asked why it has suddenly made promises before an election. Health Minister Helena Jaczek said Ontario doctors are among the highest-paid in the country, which elicited jeers from the PCs across the aisle.

NDP energy critic Peter Tabuns also asked about the IESO, asking the government why the government trusts third-party companies such as EY and Deloitte more than the Auditor General.

Heckle of the day: "Folks wanna know ..." began Todd Smith, channelling Doug Ford's favourite word, for which there is a parody website. "Folks!" heckles a Liberal MPP, as if she declared bingo.

Quote of the day: "The Premier's been running around like Oprah, giving everybody what they want with other people's money," said PC finance critic Lisa MacLeod on Wynne's spending promises, which prompted Tory MPP Sam Oosterhoff to act out the universal "make it rain" GIF, which this reporter sadly failed to capture. On the other hand, people really, really like Oprah, especially when she gives away cars. Maybe not the best analogy here.

On Twitter, at least one observer found MacLeod's comment glib.

Robert Benzie @robertbenzie

.@MacLeodLisa to @Kathleen_Wynne: "The premier is running around like @Oprah giving everybody what they want." #onpoli pic.twitter.com/LoYZ8nZ9kJ

Maureen Wilson @MohWilson

Affordable, accessible quality child care is essential. This is not a car give away.

11:09 AM - Mar 27, 2018

7 LIKES SEE MAUREEN WILSON'S OTHER TWEETS

Warnings from the Speaker: Glenn Thibeault, Toby Barrett, Randy Hillier, Sam Oosterhoff, John Yakabuski, Shafiq Qaadri, Jim Wilson.

The amount of times the word 'care' was mentioned: 63

Let them eat cake: It is Transportation Minister Kathryn McGarry's birthday.

Vote: 50–45 supported Second Reading of Bill 6, An Act to enact the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services Act, 2018 and the Correctional Services and Reintegration Act, 2018, to make related amendments to other Acts, to repeal an Act and to revoke a regulation.

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3). *OPSEU blames decades of public service cuts for violence*

By: Jessica Smith Cross

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union says there's a crisis in corrections — overcrowded and understaffed jails resulting in violent incidents and the over-reliance of solitary confinement, even for mentally ill people who should never have been allowed to wind

up in jail in the first place.

OPSEU president Warren "Smokey" Thomas held a press conference at Queen's Park Tuesday and argued that the crisis was caused by chronic underfunding of public services, starting with former premier Mike Harris and continuing to the present day.

The Liberal government is poised to unveil an election-year budget with a substantial deficit, complete with promises of major spending on new programs, including pharmacare and child care.

But Thomas argued that the government let spending on core public services fall, particularly in the criminal justice system, which has resulted in more people being in jail than there should be and a "crisis in corrections."

"They talk about caring, and they talk about all this kind of stuff," Thomas said. "But what about all the public services that people don't see directly? And corrections would be a classic example. It's hard to garner public support and sympathy for an inmate. They're somebody's brother, sister, mother, father, loved one, partner, like they're all human beings, no matter what they've done."

Thomas told the press that Harris-era cuts, followed by Liberal government cuts after the 2008-09 recession, has resulted in all the services that reduce criminality and keep people out of jail being eroded. And that's why, he argued, correctional officers' labour issues should be a ballot-box issue for Ontarians.

"If they're not, we intend to make them one," said Thomas. "I find every election fascinating, but I think this one is a pivotal moment in Ontario history. I think the political lines are blurred. Our members are saying, 'We don't know who to vote for,' and I say, 'Well, vote your self-interest.' "

At the very least, Ontario's jails should be sufficiently resourced to prevent violence — and that means more correctional officers, more jails and more supports, he said. He called for support for correctional officers in the short term, followed immediately by long-term planning for broader reform.

Chris Jackal, a correctional officer and chair of the bargaining team, gave an account of violence in provincial jails.

"Recently, a correctional nurse was punched in the face while holding a tray of medications and dragged by the hair to the ground," he said. "At Central East Correctional Centre, a handcuffed inmate punched the institutional doctor in the face."

"We understand our workplaces are dangerous, there is a level of danger to this, but none of us signed up to be punching bags," he said.

Minister of Community Safety and Correctional Services Marie-France Lalonde said the government needs to do more on corrections. Her bill on corrections reform, which limits the use of segregation, passed second reading Tuesday.

"Our budget tomorrow talks about care, as you know," she said, adding that means caring for both corrections staff and inmates. "I hope that tomorrow will give a strong a direction of where we need to go together in this journey of transformation."

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4). What you can expect from the 2018 budget spectacular

By: David Hains

It's the eve of the 2018 Charles Sousa Spectacular, as the finance minister will unveil the Liberal election year budget Wednesday afternoon.

QP Briefing will flip through hundreds of pages of government proposals, infographics and general wonkery in budget lockup, and in advance we've put together a guide to what you can

expect. The budget will effectively act as the blueprint for the Liberals' re-election platform: There will be a deficit, and everyone knows of some of the programs that it will contain – the Liberals have already announced a steady drip of funding initiatives over the past two weeks. Here's what we know and what we'll be looking for Wednesday.

The 'Care' Budget

If there's one word that the Liberals have been saying a lot lately, even more than their old standbys "fair" and "affordable," it is "care." There's health care and child care and mental health care – enough for the word to be mentioned once per minute in question period on Tuesday.

Look for the theme to be repeated throughout the Liberal responses to the budget. On Tuesday morning, the party released a statement touting its proposed child care funding in contrast to the PC leader's approach. The statement read: "While Doug Ford brags about cuts, Ontario Liberals are choosing to invest in care and the services Ontario families rely on."

All of that care costs money. The government will run a deficit of up to 1 per cent of the province's GDP, meaning up to \$8 billion. That's a far cry from the previous Liberal promise of a balanced budget, which the opposition parties are likely to seize on Wednesday.

The announcements we already know

The government announcing its budget is a lot like a child who wants to tell you what they're giving for your birthday, and so they just say so. This has taken the form of multiple announcements over the past week.

That includes:

- Free child care for children from two-and-a-half until kindergarten-age, beginning in 2020. The initiative will cost \$2.2 billion over three years. It was criticized by NDP Leader Andrea Horwath as not covering enough people. Ford has not given his stance on the proposal, but at Toronto city council he voted against using \$3.8 million in provincial money to create 264 additional child care spaces.

Rob Ferguson @robferguson1

.@FordNation won't say if he would keep @Kathleen_Wynne new daycare plan but promises platform soon. #onpoli

2:28 PM - Mar 27, 2018

SEE ROB FERGUSON'S OTHER TWEETS

- Free prescription drugs for Ontarians 65 and older. The initiative would eliminate co-pays and deductibles, and cost \$575 million annually. The Liberals are pitching it as an expansion of OHIP+, which provides free medication to Ontarians under the age of 25.
- Up to \$2.4 billion in funding for the Hospital for Sick Children's capital campaign.
- \$300 million for special education
- A 4.6 per cent (\$822 million) increase to the hospital budget, in part to keep up with overcrowding.

The government may also tout \$5 million in projects chosen from public requests and submissions.

We may also get another big proposal from the government that they've saved for budget day.

Opposition Reaction

PC finance critic Lisa MacLeod stated that the party will have five conditions that need to be met for the Tories to support the proposed budget:

- A real plan to get back to budget balance immediately.
- Match the PC commitment to get hydro rates down by an additional 12 per cent
- Match the PC commitments on long-term care and mental health to take pressure off of hospitals

- Scrap cap-and-trade and include a real plan to bring jobs to Ontario
- Provide real tax relief for Ontario families

These conditions will almost certainly not be met to PC satisfaction. Ford will appear for the first time at the budget lockup on Wednesday. While he has resisted committing to a firm policy platform just yet – it's in development – he has maintained he can cut the \$150 billion budget by 4 per cent by finding efficiencies. The premier and Liberal ministers have claimed this will lead to devastating service cuts.

For its part, the NDP has recently promoted its dental care policy proposal, and has used much of its time in question period to ask the government about its stance on the issue. Horwath has also criticized the government's OHIP+ plan and new child care plan for not covering enough people who need it.

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5). Preschoolers to get free child care, premier announces

By: Christopher Reynolds

Starting in 2020, every child between age two and a half and kindergarten will be able to toddle into a licensed child care centre for free, part of a \$2.2-billion push over three years to expand affordable access, Premier Kathleen Wynne announced Tuesday, one day before the budget.

The Liberal pledge – a key plank in an election platform rife with freshly unveiled social spending – would save families \$17,000 per child on average, the government estimates.

“When child care falls out of reach for a family, it is most often the women, the mothers, who end up struggling with that tough call to either go back to work or to stay home,” Wynne said at an elementary school in Toronto’s Regent Park neighbourhood.

Wynne told a cheering audience dotted with young mothers that affordable child care is key to close the “stark” wage gap and work toward gender equality.

A February report by Gord Cleveland, a University of Toronto economics professor emeritus, found that, on average, families would have to spend nearly one-quarter of their after-tax income to access child care for a son or daughter up to age four.

“Child care affordability is a huge problem for Ontario families,” Cleveland said, calling it a “punishing financial burden.”

About one in five families with one child can afford licensed care in the province, his study found. Only very wealthy parents with two or more children can dig up enough cash for care.

Cleveland expressed hope the government would extend funding to increase affordability for infants and younger toddlers down the line, with staffing and licensed capacity “a real constraint” to that expansion at the moment.

By 2023-24, more than 125,000 children will have access to a free preschool space, according to the education ministry. That would bring the total number of children up to the age of four in licensed child care to more than 283,000.

Ontario would be the only jurisdiction in Canada with free child care for preschool-aged children, she said, adding that preschool care comes free of charge in many European countries.

Progressive Conservative MPP Lisa MacLeod said child care has remained “inaccessible” throughout the Liberals’ 15-year tenure, with little movement under Wynne. “She’s made it worse, and an 11th-hour, Hail Mary announcement today with money that she doesn’t have – she’s going to run at least an \$8-billion deficit – is going to be a problem.

“She is pretending to be Oprah without the money Oprah has,” MacLeod said.

Lisa MacLeod @MacLeodLisa

Oprah. <https://twitter.com/chrisareynolds/status/978626294345805824>

10:42 AM - Mar 27, 2018

87 LIKES 50 PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT THIS

During his one term as a Toronto city councillor, PC Leader Doug Ford, voted against the city using \$3.8 million in provincial money to fund 264 child care spaces in 2013. "I'm not aware of that," MacLeod said.

She expressed concern that independent child care providers "will be put out of business" or forced to raise prices for parents with infants and young toddlers.

"What I'm hearing is that this is potentially a job killer, and it may make child care more expensive for those who are younger than two-and-a-half years old," MacLeod said.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa responded that the move is an "economic imperative as much as it is a societal imperative." He said employment will rise as a result, with more women free to rejoin the workforce and the province poised to hire more early childhood education providers and personal support workers.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath questioned the pre-election timing of the Liberal announcement and said the plan is pocked with "gaps" – particularly for those with children under age two and a half.

"You wonder about what the motivation is here," she told reporters. "If it takes the Liberals 15 years to finally come up with something, I'm not going to complain about it. I'm just saying it's unfortunate that they chose this path where a number of families are being left behind."

Horwath said New Democrats will unveil a "comprehensive child-care plan ... that covers everybody" along with its platform in the coming weeks.

"I can't wait to see what Doug Ford's going to have to say about child care," she added.

While the number of licensed child care spaces in Ontario has grown 38 per cent to more than 406,000 since 2012-13, licensed care in Toronto exceeds \$21,000 a year on average for an infant, the highest in Canada, according to a national survey last fall.

The province plans to create a provincial wage grid for child care staff by April 2020 that will attempt to align their wages with early childhood educators who work in kindergarten.

The government's "historic" proposal is part of its 2016 plan to roll out 100,000 licensed child care spots for children under age four within five years.

The announcement is the latest in a string of pre-budget day funding unveils in the run-up to the election campaign. Over the past two weeks, Wynne has worked to woo voters with billions in social spending announcements, including for hospital operations and infrastructure, mental health and medication coverage for seniors — all in line with the key word of the Grit campaign: "care."

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