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Articles

1). Throne Speech 2016: Premier Wynne pledges hydro bill rel

By Sabrina Nanji

Premier Kathleen Wynne is attempting to make life easier for all Ontarians.

Wynne made the promise in Monday's speech from the throne, titled A Balanced Plan to Build Ontario Up for Everyone — a reboot that ushers in the second session of the 41st parliament and outlines the government's mandate leading up to the 2018 general election.

In it, Wynne pledged relief from high electricity rates and more child-care spaces.

"Your government remains committed to building Ontario up in a way that helps you in your everyday lives," said Lt.-Gov. Elizabeth Dowdeswell, who delivered the speech in the chamber.

First up is a reprieve from electricity bills that many Ontarians have been sweating to pay. So the government, doing their best New Democrat impression, said it will introduce legislation that will give people an 8-per-cent tax rebate (equal to the province's portion of the harmonized sales tax) effective Jan. 1, 2017.

That would save about $130 per typical household per year, or $540 per year (or $45 per month) for rural ratepayers, according to the government. Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault told

reporters that the government will be giving back "about a billion dollars" altogether in savings.

"The $1 billion is the tax piece. That's specifically related to all the heavy lifting we've done over the last year to make sure that we can balance our books, and so now we're seeing that other piece, is coming from the ratepayers," Thibeault explained.

As well, expansion of the northern benefit (a.k.a. the rural or remote electricity rate protection fee that currently comes off our bills) will be subsidized by the rest of the province, figures for which Thibeault said will vary invoice-to-invoice.

"We're looking at about something under a dollar to be exact, but it varies...About $110 million is the total cost," he said.

As well, starting in 2017, the government will create an additional 100,000 licensed child-care spaces. Over the next five years, Wynne pledged $1 billion to $3 billion for capital costs and $600 million to $750 million for operating costs.

The speech contained many of the Liberal's other greatest hits, such as following through on the 12-year $160-billion infrastructure plan, and working with Ottawa to finalize an enhanced Canada Pension Plan. As well, the government said it will put a new emphasis on math skills in education, following a poor showing on EQAO results, and reducing wait times for health-care specialists.

The throne speech also hammered the point that the Liberals remain on track to balance the budget next year.

Monday's speech comes as Wynne's popularity sags in the polls, and mere weeks after the Liberals lost their stronghold in Scarborough-Rouge River, following a by-election defeat that brought rookie Progressive Conservative MPP Raymond Cho to Queen's Park.

In recent Ontario history, prorogation was invoked by Dalton McGuinty as he resigned the premier-ship. While the opposition parties decried Wynne's decision last week to prorogue the legislature, the government maintained it as a regular proceeding used by governments to recalibrate the agenda.

Both opposition parties were unimpressed with the new moves announced Monday.

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TOP

2). Patrick Brown continues to dodge sex-ed letter questions

By Jessica Smith Cross

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown spoke to the media Monday, the first time he's faced the press since the news broke that his chief of staff, Nicolas Pappalardo, distributed the controversial sex-ed letter to parents in Scarborough-Rouge River.

The Canadian Press story lengthened the list of Progressive Conservatives who knew the sex-ed letter would be distributed in the riding during the campaign. It includes: Brown's chief-of-staff Pappalardo, party president Rick Dykstra, party executive director and the manager of Brown's leadership campaign Bob Stanley — and possibly Brown himself.

But Brown has repeatedly denied having seen the letter himself until it had already gone out — and initially blamed the "local" campaign for it, saying it was a mistake.

However, on Monday, he was asked repeatedly to make a distinction between not having seen the letter itself, and not having known that a sex-ed letter would be sent out — but Brown would only repeat that he hadn't "seen" it. He wouldn't confirm or deny if he knew a letter

would be going out regarding sex-ed or comment on what he had thought it was going to say.

"I did not see that letter," he said. "I certainly wasn't comfortable with its contents."

Brown said he would have liked the letter to say what he wrote in an opinion piece in the Toronto Star.

He had never given such a full-throated public defence of the sex-ed curriculum before prior to that op-ed, and it appeared to been a change of tack from his leadership campaign. In his campaign, he took, in his own words, a "middle-of-the-road approach," of criticizing the government on its lack of consultation on the curriculum.

However, he also attended and commended the rallies against the curriculum at that time.

“It’s fantastic to see so many people out today to express our collective concern for the well-being of our children and the importance of our families,” he said, according to prepared remarks given at a February protest against the curriculum, which occurred during the campaign. He said his first principle on sex education would be: "Teachers should teach facts about sex education, not values. Parents teach values."

With that strategy, he won support of those who were overtly against the curriculum, including MPP Monte McNaughton, who dropped out of the race to support Brown, and outspoken social conservative Charles McVety.

TOP

3). Throne Speech 2016: Opposition raises an eyebrow over hy

By Sabrina Nanji

Premier Kathleen Wynne's throne speech did little to impress the opposition parties.

Monday's speech was delivered by Lt.-Gov. Elizabeth Dowdeswell following Wynne's decision to prorogue last week, and pledged an 8-per-cent harmonized sales tax rebate on hydro rates and more relief for northerners, among other promises. According to the government, the rebate (effective Jan. 1, 2017) would trim $130 annually from the typical household hydro bill, and $540 per year for rural ratepayers.

One would be forgiven for a spell of déja vu — the New Democrats have called for the outright elimination of the province's share of the HST for years, and recently reiterated the call at this year's Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference.

But, as NDP Leader Andrea Horwath pointed out, the Liberals didn't mimic the hydro-rebate-idea to a T, and instead only offered up "half a loaf."

"The Liberals have done the wrong thing, they should permanently take the HST off the hydro bill, not provide some kind of rebate. They shouldn't have put the HST on the hydro bill in the first place, and they should take it off immediately . . . Instead of doing the straight-up honest thing and the thing that people want to see, which is removing the HST off of the bills — the Liberals are not doing that," Horwath said at a media conference.

"New Democrats work hard for the people of the province all the time . . . we're proud of that track record. If it provides some relief for the families of Ontario, then we're happy to see that," she added.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown echoed Horwath's skepticism, calling the hydro rebate a "band-aid solution" that came about only because the Liberals lost their stronghold in the Scarborough-Rouge River byelection. As such, Brown said it would be more apt to call it the "Raymond Cho hydro benefit," giving credit to the newest MPP at Queen's Park, who wrested the Scarborough seat from the Liberals two weeks prior.

"It's a bit rich coming from the government that introduced the HST burden on hydro rates,"

Brown added, saying he's skeptical the tax refund will actually spell "meaningful" relief (as the energy minister put it that morning), in light of the expectation that electricity rates will rise.

"Hydro rates are not going down . . . Even after today's announcement bills will get more expensive because of failed Liberal policies that will still be in place and will continue to drive rates up," Brown said.

But Finance Minister Charles Sousa denied the hydro benefit was a knee-jerk response to a byelection loss, saying he and the Premier had been discussing the matter for "months."

"What's driving this is the ability to deliver something for our communities and something for our families. And the driving force behind this is the needs of the people of Ontario, not the needs of any political party," Sousa told reporters following the throne speech.

[TOP]

4). Throne Speech 2016: More help for manufacturers on the w

By Geoff Zochodne

Monday's throne speech from Ontario's Liberal government teased the prospect of more money for manufacturers, along with additional help with industrial-strength hydro bills.

"Your government will partner with manufacturers and automakers to attract new mandates and the next generation of advanced manufacturing and engineering talent," stated the throne speech, which outlined the Liberal government's priorities for the new legislative session.

The government's penchant for throwing cash at manufacturers isn't exactly a bold, new strategy. The Liberals have used their 10-year, $2.7-billion Jobs and Prosperity Fund in the past few months to give grants to the likes of General Electric and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Canada.

"The Jobs and Prosperity Fund has helped strengthen Ontario's key sectors, including the automotive industry — which employs tens of thousands of highly skilled Ontario workers," said the throne speech. "And now, these workers have the opportunity to help invent the cars of the future — connected, autonomous cars and electric vehicles."

But there is still uncertainty in Ontario's manufacturing sector, which has shed tens of thousands of jobs in recent years, and the doubts are particularly strong in the auto industry. Private-sector union Unifor — whose president, Jerry Dias, was spotted among those in attendance for the throne speech — is currently locked in key contract negotiations with the Detroit Three automakers, FCA, Ford and General Motors. Those talks will have a far-reaching impact on Ontario's manufacturing sector, as plants that employ thousands of workers in Oshawa, Brampton and Windsor have uncertain futures.

Economic Development Minister Brad Duguid, albeit having just read the throne speech, said the commitment is consistent with its previous dealings with the auto sector.

"This government's always been here for the auto sector," he told QP Briefing Monday. "We've invested significant amounts that have helped create and retain thousands of jobs in that sector."

Duguid said the Liberal government's approach "stands in stark contrast" to the opposition parties, whom he said don't support that approach.

"By having it in the throne speech, it really just reconfirms that we recognize the importance of partnering with business to attract investment and we're going to continue to do that," Duguid added.

The Liberal government also promised in the throne speech that they'd help more Ontarians with their electricity bills, including industrial citizens.

"Your government also intends to implement new measures to ensure that Ontario commercial

and industrial ratepayers can also benefit from lower electricity costs," stated the speech.

Those new measures involve expanding the eligibility for the Industrial Conservation Initiative, which nudges big power consumers toward shifting their use of off peak periods, lowering their electricity costs. The ICI does so by charging participants a global adjustment fee — which customers pay to cover the cost of electricity generated above the market price, as well as expenses related to conservation programs — that is equal to their share of total system demand during the five highest peak hours in a year. If an industrial electricity customer is responsible for 1 per cent of provincial demand, they'll pay 1 per cent of the entire global adjustment charge, giving them an incentive to change their consumption habits.

According to the Independent Electricity System Operator, the province's manager of the power grid, there was 1,000 megawatts worth of ICI capacity in 2015. The threshold for the ICI was dropped in 2015 to a three-megawatt monthly peak demand from its previous floor of five megawatts.

There will also be help at the local distribution level, the government said, as the municipal utilities "will continue to provide significant programs tailored to specific business classes and needs."

"When fully implemented, participating industrial customers will be able to find cost savings of up to 34 per cent, depending on their ability to reduce peak electricity consumption," stated the speech.

Duguid said expanding the ICI will be "very significant and [continue] to ensure we remain a very competitive jurisdiction to attract business and investment."

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TOP

5). Throne Speech 2016: 100,000 new licensed child care spac

By Jessica Smith Cross

The Ontario government's promise to build 100,000 new licensed child-care spaces will cost the government up to $3.75 billion over the next five years.

The promise — one of two major new, expensive policy initiatives announced in Monday's speech from the throne — will see the government help build 100,000 new child care spaces for children 4 years old and younger.

The capital cost is estimated at anywhere between $1 billion to $3 billion over the next five years, said Associate Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris, who is responsible for early years and child care. The operating cost is estimated at $600 million to $750 million.

The government is nearly finished allocating $120 million to build 4,000 new spaces in schools. Should the cost remain the same for the 100,000 new spaces, the bill will ultimately come in at about the $3-billion mark. According to the minister, whether the child-care spaces are to be home-based or community based is yet to be worked out, and the wide range in the capital estimate is because the government has to consult with its child-care partners to find the best solutions.

"When it comes to our children and the future of Ontario, and making sure our children are in a safe environment, of course we can afford it," she said. "This is an investment in the future of this province and the future of our children, ultimately, in the end, that money will trickle down in many different ways. First of all, it's going to make sure our children are on a path to success. Secondly, we know there is a gender wage gap problem, and this is a step toward addressing that. It will be empowering women, and allowing them, if they choose, to go out and work . . . It will also help us with poverty reduction."

Any funding from the federal government, as part of its promised National Early Learning and Child Care Framework, will be on top of this commitment from the provincial government, Naidoo-Harris said.

"This is just the premier's commitment to the province, and to the people of Ontario," she said.

According to the ministry, the 100,000 spaces will double the current capacity of licensed spaces for children from infancy to 4-years old, creating spaces for 40 per cent of children.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said her party has concerns about the affordability of child care, and believes there should be a public child-care system in Ontario.

[TOP]

6). Throne Speech 2016: Health-care priorities include central

By Jessica Smith Cross

The Liberal government signalled some new health-care priorities in the Speech from the Throne, including reducing specialist wait times and corralling health-care administrators' compensation.

The Ontario government announced plans to take further steps to reduce the wait times patients face in seeing a specialist in Ontario — and Health Minister Eric Hoskins said that means centralizing the specialist referral system, following a strategy that the province has used with its low back pain strategy.

"Where an individual has been assessed as in need of seeing a specialist for back pain, there's a centralized process they go through," he said. "I expect it will be different for different specialties and we're working with specialties to get a better understanding of what the impediments are and to streamline it."

In other news for specialists, the throne speech also contained a sign that the government plans to continue to take a hard line on physician compensation.

The government "believes that additional resources for health care should be directed where they will help patients most, at the front line — not only to the highest-billing physicians or highly paid administrators," the speech said.

Hoskins said the government still believes its last offer to doctors — the tentative Physician Services Agreement that was supported by the Ontario Medical Association (OMA) but voted down by doctors — was a fair one.

"We have a responsibility to continue to manage the health-care system and make continued investments in home and community care, in our nurses, in our hospitals, so we'll take that responsibility to move forward," said Hoskins.

Increases to the Physician Services Budget will be spent on "supporting family doctors" and 800 to 900 new doctors, but not increases to compensation high-billing specialists, and Hoskins isn't ruling out taking unilateral actions to achieve those goals.

The throne speech's reference to "highly paid administrators" speaks to a concern voiced by some doctors that too much of the health-care budget goes to compensation in the bureaucracy.

According to Hoskins, the Ministry of Health and the Treasury Board have been in communication with the health-care management sector to make it aware of the government's new expectations concerning a framework for executive compensation in the Local Health Integration Networks, the soon-to-be defunct Community Care Access Centres, and hospitals.

TOP

7). Raymond Cho sworn in as MPP

By Jessica Smith Cross

Raymond Cho was sworn in as the Progressive Conservative MPP for Scarborough-Rouge River Monday morning — and quipped that he was thankful Tory Leader Patrick Brown allowed him to run again, and this time, "finally" get in.

Cho thanked his wife, Soon Ok, whom he said was his "campaign manager, and life manager," and the key to all of his electoral victories as a councillor in the riding since 1991.

"I'm so lucky," he said. "If you want to become a successful person, marry right girl."

Cho also thanked Doug Ford, who co-managed his campaign — and shared a story about how Ford was almost the candidate himself.

"We were fighting, encouraging Doug to run — he's so popular in Scarborough," Cho said. "He almost accepted the offer, my offer, my wife's offer, but finally she said, 'No, no, Raymond you have to run.' So, I will never, ever forget your friendship and your strong support."

Instead of running in the byelection, Ford helped to run the campaign.

"Doug Ford, my good friend, he worked so hard," Cho said. "Putting up the signs, taking down the signs after the election, knocking on the doors with me, delivering the pizza for our volunteers."

Ford, who's recently said he's considering a run for mayor or provincial office, said he's not too sure when his swearing-in will be.

"We'll have to wait a little bit," he said with a laugh.

TOP

8). People on the Move

By Geoff Zochodne

There are more comings and goings among the ranks of chiefs of staff to Ontario government ministers.

Andrew Bevan, chief of staff and principal secretary to Premier Kathleen Wynne, confirmed the changes in a Sept. 9 memo to all staff. The chiefs of staff roster had already been updated at least once before this year, following June's cabinet shuffle.

But now Omar Khan, who had been chief of staff to Health Minister Eric Hoskins, has been replaced by Derrick Araneda. According to the Government of Ontario directory, Araneda had been director of stakeholder relations in the health minister's office. Khan tweeted that he was heading to the private sector.

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After a decade at Queen's Park 2day is my last day. Moving to private sector gig this October. It's been an honour doing public service!

— Omar Yar Khan (@OmarYKhan) September 9, 2016

The other changes include Environment and Climate Change Minister Glen Murray landing a permanent chief of staff, Mandy Maghera, who steps into the job on Sept. 19. According to the

government directory, Maghera had previously been a senior stakeholder relations adviser to Murray. Iain Myrans had been Murray's acting chief of staff.

Two more acting chiefs of staff — Doug Tindal for Housing Minister Chris Ballard and Josh Arnold for Natural Resources Minister Kathryn McGarry — have been replaced with permanent staffers. Emily Feairs now oversees Ballard's office, while Sayla Nordin does the same for McGarry.

Bevan also said that Michael Coe, who had been chief of staff to Indira Naidoo-Harris when she was the minister tasked with watching over the Ontario Retirement Pension Plan, is now in the premier's office as chief of staff for intergovernmental affairs. Naidoo-Harris' chief of staff was given as "(TBC)" — which QP Briefing assumes is "To Be Confirmed." Naidoo-Harris, following a national deal on Canada Pension Plan reform, which resulted in the Liberal government turfing the ORPP, is now an associate minister of education with responsibility for child care.

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According to an order-in-council, Monique Smith, Ontario's representative in Washington, has been reappointed to another three-year term.

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Per another order-in-council, Matthew Torigian has been appointed as Ontario's Commissioner of Emergency Management. Torigian is/was the deputy minister for community safety and correctional services.

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J. Robert Prichard has been reappointed as a Metrolinx board member. He has also been redesignated as chair of the board for the GTA transit agency.

Bruce McCuaig, meanwhile, has been handed another three-year term on the board of Metrolinx, as well as another three-year stint as the agency's CEO. Former Tory MPP and cabinet minister Janet Ecker has also been reappointed to the Metrolinx board for another three years.

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It's not always this good. Send your tips to gzochodne@qpbriefing.com.

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The following appointments have been made to classified agencies and non-classified entities in the past 30 days:

FRENCH LANGUAGE HEALTH SERVICES ADVISORY COUNCIL
•Marie-Noëlle Lanthier

LANDLORD AND TENANT BOARD (SOCIAL JUSTICE TRIBUNALS ONTARIO)
•Lorraine Mathers

TOP

9). Seen: Liberals' extra hydro help for rural Ontario to be pa

By Geoff Zochodne

All Ontario electricity customers will pay to ease the pain of rural hydro ratepayers, according to the Liberal government's throne speech.

The speech said the government will offer households a rebate equal to the eight per cent

provincial portion of the HST on electricity bills. The speech also telegraphed the Liberals' plan to extend even more assistance to Ontarians living off the beaten path – with a fee that all electricity customers in the province pay.

“Additionally, in recognition of the unique and special circumstances associated with the electricity cost-of-service for rural ratepayers, the existing rural support program would be significantly enhanced to provide even more on-bill savings for Ontario's eligible rural customers,” stated the throne speech. “Eligible rural customers would receive these additional savings, which would result in an on-bill monthly saving of about 20 per cent — approximately $45 a month.”

The current support program is called the rural or remote electricity rate protection (RRRP) program. In the past, the fee has been proposed to pay for a new transmission line in northwestern Ontario.

The RRRP charge for 2016 was set at 0.13 cents per kilowatt hour. All Ontario electricity customers pay the fee, which means they'll pay the "enhanced" charge as well.

“Together, the rebate of the provincial portion of the HST and the enhanced RRRP will provide eligible rural customers across Ontario with on-bill monthly savings of about 20 per cent, or about $45 per month,” added a government backgrounder.

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