

Radio Transcript: Weekly Ottawa Morning Interview with Rob Benzie (Feb 28, 2017)

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CBC RADIO OTTAWA MORNING INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BENZIE

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Speaker(s): Robert Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star; Andrea Horwath, Leader, New Democratic Party of Ontario

CBC: Well, keeping the lights on is becoming a luxury in this province. That's according to NDP Leader Andrea Horwath. And she says she has a plan to cut rising hydro bills by as much as 30-per-cent.

[CLIP] ANDREA HORWATH, LEADER, NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF ONTARIO: The Liberals continue to drive the electricity system in the wrong direction and it has to stop. And so we've looked very, very carefully at what we can do to make the changes and we're determined to make those changes for the people of Ontario.

CBC: Horwath's announcement comes as the Liberals continue to face heat from consumers upset over rising hydro bills. Premier Kathleen Wynne has promised more relief before her government tables the spring budget. But let's hear more from Rob Benzie, the Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star. Good morning Rob.

ROB BENZIE, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF FOR THE TORONTO STAR: Good morning Hallie.

CBC: So what is Andrea Horwath's plan to lower hydro bills and could it work?

BENZIE: It's not a plan so much as it is a proposal that she knows we should never have to implement because the government's going to come forward with something before this but it's a smart political play on her part to get out in front of what the Liberals are going to do. We're going to see some—as package of, a further package of relief in the next few weeks so if any of the measures that Andrea Horwath proposed are in the Liberal plan she can take credit for them. So it's clever politics. But in practical terms some of what she said yesterday isn't really viable. A big and expensive part of what she proposed wouldn't even actually have any impact on hydro bills at all and that's to buy back the Hydro One shares, Hydro One is the provincial transmission utility and as you know, Hallie, they've been selling, they've been selling the shares for that. They're selling up to 60-per-cent of the utility for \$9-billion dollars and they're going to use the proceeds of that, \$4-billion, towards transit and infrastructure, with the remaining \$5-billion paying down Hydro One's debt. So that ship is already sailing right now; 30-per-cent of the utility has been sold. It would be very, very expensive to buy it back and you wouldn't get anything for it other than the asset. You have this asset back but you wouldn't be necessarily getting cheaper electricity out of it because Hydro One doesn't set electricity prices, the Independent Ontario Electricity Board does. So that - but the Democrats are opposed to the sale, as are the Tories, and they said look we've got to stop this and then if we control it then we can -- it can maybe be made cheaper.

CBC: Rob, one of the aspects that I did find interesting though in this NDP plan is this time-of-use pricing would be phased out or it would give people an option to phase it out. Why, why is that part of her plan?

BENZIE: And that's an interesting thing. That's something -- there's going to be some pilot projects later this year to allow people to opt out of time-of-use pricing. Some utilities are looking at this and the reason that they do have, is that right now it's a one size fits all so that someone who is retired at home pay -- you know needs electricity during the day whereas you and I may not need it in the day but we need it at night. So there's different peaks for us than there are for retirees, say. So they want to make it so that in the future it will be more like your cell phone plan, so you can pick and choose so that you might be able to pay a higher rate at a certain time when you're not around and a lower rate at another time you are around. And then right now it's based on the clock and that's it. So there's peak times and there's lower times. So Horwath says that people should be able to opt out. Everybody should be able to opt out. And there would be sort of a flat price of she says, of 10.3 cents kilowatt hour regardless of when you're using it. The government said that that's too low. If it's anything below 11 cents it's going -- it's not going to be viable. But it is something that is worth considering and we're going to see a pilot project later this year. So if that pilot is successful the NDP will be able to take credit for it.

CBC: I was going to say you said earlier that they're getting the jump on the Liberals by releasing these ideas now. Let's jump over to the PCs. Have they been -- have they produced some ideas on how to make bills more manageable?

BENZIE: Well no Hallie, they're leading in the polls by so much right now that they don't want to say anything and we will not see a plan from them until at least before November. They have a policy convention in Toronto at that time and then we hope to see some kind of a platform. But right now all we hear from the Conservatives are we're going to find efficiencies and we're going to stop the wasteful Liberal government's green energy plans with them -- how they are going to unravel those. So it's - they are being very vague. The NDP deserves credit for actually putting some policy meat on the bones. This package yesterday was 13 pages long which is longer than their entire election platform was in 2014--

CBC: I think they figured they found a winning issue here in hydro.

BENZIE: I think so. What I think they also know is that the Liberals will find a fix for it. I mean, Horwath says she'd like to cut between 17 and 30-per-cent off your hydro bill. Well 8-per-cent is already included that the Liberals have already done by getting rid of the provincial portion and the HST. She's - Horwath says well she will get the federal government to get rid of the 5-per-cent, the additional 5-per-cent of the HST. I don't know, I think if that's ever going to happen it would be more likely that Kathleen Wynne who is close to Justin Trudeau would be able to get that then Andrea Horwath who is not. But anyway I don't think that's, I don't think that's going to happen because federal government has no money anyway. It's running a massive deficit so they're not going to be able to give Ontario a break on hydro.

CBC: I want to move on to another story here Rob. A Liberal motion condemning Islamophobia was - has polarized the House of Commons here in Ottawa but a similar motion got unanimous support in Queen's Park. Why the difference?

BENZIE: I know. Geography. 450 kilometers apart, I guess. It's a strange, strange thing. Nathalie Des Rosiers, Ottawa-Vanier MPP proposed a Motion 37 here at Queen's Park that is virtually identical to Motion 103, the very controversial motion that's going through the Commons. And last Thursday it passed 81 to nothing. And it's a very simple motion. It basically says that we condemn Islamophobia and all forms of hatred and racism. And it focuses on discrimination against Muslims because of what happened in Quebec City in January, the murder of six worshipers at a mosque; shocked the whole country, shocked the world. And I think that parliamentarians in Ottawa and here wanted to act. Because the federal Conservatives are going through a leadership race and beating up on Muslims is fashionable in some quarters in that party, it's been a very divisive issue in the Commons-

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CBC: Right but at the provincial level--

BENZIE: In Queen's Park it hasn't, no.

CBC: Did Patrick Brown have to work hard to get his caucus to support it?

BENZIE: He gave I thought his best speech ever as leader in the legislature last Thursday in proposing in supporting this motion saying look we have to rally to our friends and neighbours. And his campaign's co-chair is Muslim. He's attracting many Muslim candidates to his party. So he feels this in a genuine way, he's very passionate about it and I thought he would get a good job in rallying his MPPs to his cause. This is a symbolic motion. You get some people out there saying, "Oh this is the beginning of Sharia law" and this and that. And there's a lot of misconceptions about it and a lot of ire frankly over this that is really bizarre frankly, that's based on prejudice. And I thought that Brown was good to stare it down -- stare that down. Andrew Horwath had her party voting for it, Kathleen Wynne had her party voting for it so -- and it was a really nice moment in the legislature when you had leaders of the Muslim community here in Toronto there to see this. And it was actually a very powerful and positive moment I thought. Now, I know Mr. Brown is getting a lot of hate on Twitter and some of the e-mails that I see from readers and listeners; it really does shock me how insensitive they are about this largely symbolic motion. But I think it was a good symbol to send to a community that feels under fire in Canada and probably rightly so given the rhetoric that we hear in the United States right now.