

Radio Transcript: Weekly Ottawa Morning Interview with Rob Benzie (Mar 21, 2017)

From: "Stinson, Jeffrey (CAB)" <jeffrey.stinson@ontario.ca>
To: "@CAB-Trans CO" <cab-transco@msgov.gov.on.ca>, "@CAB-Trans PO" <cab-transpo@msgov.gov.on.ca>
Cc: "Di Giovanni, Robert (CAB)" <robert.digiovanni@ontario.ca>, "Sumi, Craig (CAB)" <craig.sumi@ontario.ca>, Electronic Media <cab.emedia@ontario.ca>, "Stinson, Jeffrey (CAB)" <jeffrey.stinson@ontario.ca>
Date: Tue, 21 Mar 2017 09:29:02 -0400
Attachments: 20170321 - CBC Ottawa Morning - Rob Benzie.doc (55.3 kB)

OTTAWA MORNING INTERVIEW WITH ROB BENZIE

Date: March 21, 2016
Station: CBC Radio (Ottawa)
Length: 6:56 minutes
Speaker(s): Rob Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star; Patrick Brown, Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader

CBC: Public service announcements or partisan propaganda? That ad paid for by the government of Ontario has the opposition shooting sparks. Rob Benzie has been covering this issue. He's Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star and we've reached him in Toronto. Good morning Rob.

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

CBC: So just remind us the broad strokes of what the hydro plan is.

BENZIE: Well this is the 25-per-cent rate cut this year. It builds; it was 8-per-cent as of January 1st. That was the HST, provincial portion of the HST was trimmed from bills. And then as of June, another 17-per-cent on average will come in from residential electricity bills. And this is of course because there is mounting anger across the province over the price of electricity. So the government is basically renegotiating its mortgage on paying for electricity infrastructure, power plants and so on. So instead of paying them off over 20 years, they'll be paid off over 25 years. Smoothing it out they call it, and that should-- it will add interest costs; about \$25-billion of interest over the next 30 years. But it will mean a lower hydro rate for you and I for the next little while--

CBC: And were learning about it in these ads. The PCs are unhappy about them but I don't know why, Rob?

CBC: Well I mean the Conservatives and the New Democrats in opposition are very upset about these ads and it dominated Question Period yesterday. And that's because this measure has not taken place, this 25-per-cent rate cut, because the legislation hasn't passed; the regulations haven't passed and they won't for a little while. But it will take effect in your electricity bill in two or three months. So I think that the government wants people to be aware of it for lots of reasons, not the least of which is it would help the Liberals politically if they don't get pasted on electricity prices. And we're already seeing this frankly Hallie. There were several polls in the last week or so that are showing that the Liberals have found stuff a little bit because the electricity issue is maybe not being as big as it was.

CBC: The Liberals wouldn't be the first political party or rather government to spend big money on bragging about their accomplishments. Is this, just to make sure I understand, is this general coffers or is this the Liberal Party paying for these ads?

BENZIE: This is government coffers. Now these ads don't mention Liberals, they just talk about what your government is doing and we've heard you. I think that's the controversial part of the ad is, we've heard you, because that suggests that the government is an entity that is sort of boosting the polls and moving on focus groups and so on which of course it is but they don't usually say that in ads and the auditor general who monitors ads in Ontario, she's expressed concern about these radio ads but she can't do anything about them.

CBC: So what has the-- as this sort of opposition to these ads mount, what does the government say?

BENZIE: The government says they've spent less than a million dollars so far on the ads and they're going to be spending a bit more in the next few weeks because they're just on radio right now; so private radio stations and on social media, but they're soon going to be ads on television and so on. And they're not apologetic about it because as Premier Kathleen Wynne said yesterday, look I've just been touring the province in the last week. People are interested in this. She is asked a lot about it, there's no question. There's government polling I think that shows something like 80-per-cent of Ontarians are aware of the-- or 75-per-cent of Ontarians were aware of this within a few days and that's just from the earned media coverage that you know in the Toronto Star and on CBC and so on. It's, you know, much greater than that now thanks to radio ads.

CBC: Meanwhile, the Conservatives are putting out some ads of their own on YouTube featuring a warm and fuzzy Patrick Brown. Take a listen.

[CLIP] PATRICK BROWN, ONTARIO PROGRESSIVE CONSERVATIVE LEADER: It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter who you love. It doesn't matter if you belong to a union. It doesn't matter how much you make. It doesn't matter where you worship. You have a home in the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario.

CBC: Shades of Justin Trudeau a bit. What are the PCs doing with these ads?

BENZIE: Well it's sunny waves indeed Hallie. What the Tories are doing is they're trying to brand their leader who's been the leader for just under two years' time, Patrick Brown. They want to brand him before the Liberals brand him in a negative fashion before the June 2018 election. So these are web ads so far. There probably will be a small TV buy down the road, but not for a little while and these are just to get some earned media from the likes of us I suppose. But the ads are interesting because they are very, very small [Inaudible] Liberal. The ad starts with 'I believe' in that font in the neutral font that's on the TV show, Girls, that [Inaudible] a very powerful font. And it says 'I believe' and then it shows Patrick Brown at the Gay Pride Parade here in Toronto. Shows him as Khalsa Day, the Sikh parade here, wearing you know traditional Sikh scarf on his head. It's a very interesting kind of big tent approach and they're trying to show that he is a pragmatic Conservative so-called, not a not a social Conservative which he certainly has broken with the social Conservatives who helped elect him in 2015. He had a lot of support from the religious right when he was running in the PC leadership. He's since renounced that and is you know pro-choice, in favour of same sex marriage and supports the sex education curriculum that has been controversial in some circles.

CBC: And how are the Liberals pushing back against this warm and fuzzy?

BENZIE: Well they say don't buy it. They haven't done any ads of their own. They're too busy promoting the plan. They haven't done any ads yet attacking Mr. Brown but they are saying, look come on, you know this is-- they're saying give us a break because who is he really because he was supportive of certain groups before he became leader and now he's not. I mean you remember he has a voting record on Parliament Hill for nine years as an MP in Stephen Harper's caucus and he was on the far-- kind of on the right of that caucus. He has since moved much more to the centre. And I think though it's interesting because he's positioned himself in such a mainstream way and it's a real contrast I think Hallie to what we're seeing in the federal Conservative leadership race where Mr. Brown is remaining neutral in that race where you see a lot of, you know, very sort of marginal positions on things like-- on positions toward Muslims and so on. Mr. Brown has courted new

Canadians, cultural Canadian groups, in a way that no Ontario Conservative leader ever has. So it's very, very different kind of approach to electioneering.

CBC: Rob thanks very much for this.

BENZIE: All right Hallie.

CBC: Take care. Rob Benzie, Queen's Park Bureau Chief for the Toronto Star.