

Morning Media Scan: Hydro Rate Reduction - June 7, 2018

From: "Stinson, Jeffrey (CAB)" <jeffrey.stinson@ontario.ca>
To: "Basha, Cindy (CAB)" <cindy.basha@ontario.ca>, "Bateman, April (CAB)" <april.bateman@ontario.ca>, "Betzner, Lynn (CAB)" <lynn.betzner@ontario.ca>, "Bourdeau, Annette (CAB)" <annette.bourdeau2@ontario.ca>, "Bromm, William (CAB)" <william.bromm2@ontario.ca>, "Brown, Kyle (CAB)" <kyle.r.brown2@ontario.ca>, "Carrington, Sharlyn (CAB)" <sharlyn.carrington2@ontario.ca>, "Colford, Jonathan (CAB)" <jonathan.colford@ontario.ca>, "Covert, Leah (CAB)" <leah.covert@ontario.ca>, "Curtin, Marybeth (CAB)" <marybeth.curtin3@ontario.ca>, "Davidson, Steven (CAB)" <steven.davidson@ontario.ca>, "Deschamps, Angèle (CAB)" <angele.deschamps@ontario.ca>, "Di Giovanni, Robert (CAB)" <robert.digiovanni@ontario.ca>, "Dicks, Steve (CAB)" <steve.dicks2@ontario.ca>, "Doose, Ann (CAB)" <ann.doose2@ontario.ca>, "Evans, Kirsten (CAB)" <kirsten.evans2@ontario.ca>, "Farrow, Alicia (CAB)" <alicia.farrow@ontario.ca>, "Forrest, Jamie (CAB)" <jamie.forrest@ontario.ca>, "Foster, Robert (CAB)" <robert.foster@ontario.ca>, "Fournier, Pierre (CAB)" <pierre.fournier@ontario.ca>, "Green, Patrice (CAB)" <patrice.green2@ontario.ca>, "Greson, Sean (CAB)" <sean.greson2@ontario.ca>, "Hall, Caspar (CAB)" <caspar.hall@ontario.ca>, "Hartley, Hillary (CAB)" <hillary.hartley@ontario.ca>, "Heitshu, Tania (CAB)" <tania.heitshu2@ontario.ca>, "Hwang, Wendy (CAB)" <wendy.hwang@ontario.ca>, "Jonsson, Rachel (CAB)" <rachel.jonsson2@ontario.ca>, "Kwamena, Boafoa (CAB)" <boafoa.kwamena@ontario.ca>, "Lepage, Guy (CAB)" <guy.lepage@ontario.ca>, "Lewis, Allison (CAB)" <allison.lewis@ontario.ca>, "Ma, Cesue (CAB)" <cesue.ma@ontario.ca>, "Maddock, Michael (CAB)" <michael.maddock@ontario.ca>, "McElgunn, Jim (CAB)" <jim.mcelgunn@ontario.ca>, "McMichael, Rhonda (CAB)" <rhonda.mcmichael@ontario.ca>, "Paech, Arielle (CAB)" <arielle.paech2@ontario.ca>, "Peyer, Murielle (CAB)" <murielle.peyer2@ontario.ca>, "Pollett, Rene (CAB)" <rene.pollett2@ontario.ca>, "Roach, Jackie (CAB)" <jackie.roach4@ontario.ca>, "Scott, Adrienne (CAB)" <adrienne.scott@ontario.ca>, "Skene, Katherine (CAB)" <katherine.skene@ontario.ca>, "Tomescu, Alexandra (CAB)" <alexandra.tomescu@ontario.ca>, "van der Valk, Jennifer (CAB)" <jennifer.vandervalk3@ontario.ca>, "Wheeler, Stewart (CAB)" <stewart.wheeler@ontario.ca>, "Wolgelerenter, Debbie (CAB)" <debbie.wolgelerenter2@ontario.ca>, "Yoo, Sarah (CAB)" <sarah.yoo@ontario.ca>, "Potter, Shelley (OPO)" <shelley.potter@ontario.ca>, "Marangoni, Emily (OPO)" <emily.marangoni@ontario.ca>
Cc: "Sumi, Craig (CAB)" <craig.sumi@ontario.ca>, "Di Giovanni, Robert (CAB)" <robert.digiovanni@ontario.ca>, "Law, Sally (CAB)" <sally.law@ontario.ca>, "Stinson, Jeffrey (CAB)" <jeffrey.stinson@ontario.ca>, "Nutter, George (ENERGY)" <george.nutter@ontario.ca>, "Ma, Cesue (CAB)" <cesue.ma@ontario.ca>, "Truong, Kimberly (CAB)" <kimberly.truong@ontario.ca>, Electronic Media <cab.amedia@ontario.ca>
Date: Thu, 07 Jun 2018 09:00:21 -0400
Attachments: 20180607 - Media Scan - Hydro Rate Reduction (Morning Scan).doc (97.79 kB)

Media Scan Hydro Rate Reduction Pla

June 7, 2018

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PUBLICATION: London Free Press
PAGE: A5
DATE: 2018.06.07
SECTION: News
EDITION: Final
SOURCE: London Free Press
KEYWORDS: child,liberals,children,between,kindergarten,eligible
ILLUSTRATION: / (See hardcopy for photo); / Files; / (See hardcopy for photo);
WORD COUNT: 1121

Where the big three stand on five key issues; AS Ontario's 29-day election campaign ends and voters head to the polls today, Postmedia News reporter Jon Willing breaks down the platforms of the major political parties in five critical areas

CHILD CARE

Liberals: Children between the ages of 2 1/2 and kindergarten age would be eligible for free preschool beginning in 2020. The Liberals say it would save families an average of \$17,000 a child. The party would create 100,000 new licensed child care spaces during five years, spend \$1 billion during three years for increased access to licensed child care for infants and toddlers and reduce subsidy wait lists. First Nations communities would receive 4,500 new child care spaces. Child care workers across the province would receive higher wages.

NDP: Households with incomes less than \$40,000 wouldn't have to pay for licensed, not-for-profit child care. All other families would have fees based on their ability to pay, with the party estimating the average fee at \$12 a day. Wages for early childhood educators would go up. The number of licensed non-for-profit spaces would increase by 202,000.

Progressive Conservatives: The PC party would offer a tax credit for up to 75 per cent of costs for children up to age 15. The rebate would be on a sliding scale, according to the party's announcement in April. On one end, low-income families could recover 75 per cent of child care costs and, at the other end, families earning \$150,000 would recover 26 per cent. It would be up to families to choose what kind of child care

providers they wanted to use.

TRANSIT

Liberals: The provincial Liberal government made a monetary commitment to Stage 2 LRT in Ottawa. The party also is promising fare discounts in the Toronto area. Seniors across the province would get refundable 15 per cent tax credits for transit costs.

NDP: Transit agencies would receive half of their net costs for operating public transit - those costs left after fare revenue and other fees were subtracted from the expenses - covered by the provincial government. The NDP would have all-day GO rail service between Kitchener and Toronto, GO rail service between Niagara and Toronto and implement a northern rail strategy. The party would support a subway relief line in Toronto and LRT in Hamilton. The party also has voiced support for Ottawa's Stage 2 LRT project. **Progressive Conservatives:** The PCs support Ottawa's Stage 2 LRT project. In the Toronto area, the party would have more all-day GO rail service and upload the costs of Toronto subway infrastructure to the province. The party commits to \$5 billion in new subway funding for Toronto.

HYDRO

Liberals: Touting their Fair Hydro Plan, the Liberals argue they have reduced electricity bills by 25 per cent by borrowing money and spreading out the cost of updating the electricity system, although the province's auditor general called into question the accounting practices that underpinned the scheme. Now, the party wants to design a system that reduces greenhouse gases, the burden placed on electricity ratepayers.

NDP: Hydro One would be brought back into total public ownership, which the party said would reduce hydro bills by 30 per cent. The party says it would stop time-of-day pricing and make sure rural residents paid the same electricity delivery charges as urban residents. **Progressive Conservatives:** The first priority for the party would be firing the board and CEO of Hydro One. The PCs would reduce electricity rates by 12 per cent and apply the province's Hydro One dividend to electricity bills to reduce the burden on ratepayers. Conservation programs would be shifted to the tax base, rather than electricity bills.

HEALTH CARE

Liberals: Hospital funding would receive an \$822-million boost in the current fiscal year. Prescription drugs for seniors would be free. There would be capped reimbursements for drug and dental costs. Mental health and addiction services would receive \$2.1 billion during four years. There would be more money for home care, 30,000 new long-term beds during 10 years, more nursing care in long-term care facilities and more money for community-based palliative care.

NDP: A universal pharmacare program would launch by 2020, starting with coverage for 125 "essential" medicines. A new Ontario Benefits program would provide dental benefits to every worker. Low-income workers would have their contributions to the benefit refunded. Seniors without retiree benefits and people on social assistance would be eligible for public dental coverage. Hospitals would receive an extra \$916 million. There would be more money for hospital expansions. Extra funding would cut down on surgery cancellations. There would be 40,000 more long-term care beds. Home care wait lists would be eliminated.

There would be more community health centres. There would be no more wait times for palliative care.

There would be full coverage for take-home cancer drugs. There would be 360 more midwives.

Progressive Conservatives: Mental health, addictions and housing services would receive another \$3.8 billion. The party believes it can cut hospital wait times by creating 15,000 long-term care beds in five years and 30,000 beds in 10 years. Low-income seniors would receive free dental care.

EDUCATION

Liberals: There would be 2,000 new teachers and education workers, and another 450 guidance teachers. More schools would have access to high-speed internet service and there would be \$16 billion during 10 years for new and improved schools. There would be more "classroom emphasis on problem-solving, critical thinking, communication and collaboration." The party would tweak the student assessment process. It would have more math tutoring resources.

The party would earmark \$3 million to refurbish musical instruments. The Liberals would provide more financial aid to postsecondary students from middle-class families and increase the number of graduates in science, technology, engineering and math.

NDP: There no longer would be kindergarten/Grade 1 split classrooms. The party would cap kindergarten classes at 26 pupils. There would be an increase in funding for special education. A moratorium on school closings would be in place until there was a new funding formula and there would be \$16 billion to repair schools. There would be no more standardized testing. Any postsecondary student who qualified for an Ontario Student Assistance Plan (OSAP) loan would receive the money as a non-repayable grant. Interest on all existing provincial student loans would be forgiven. The NDP would create the province's first Franco-Ontarian university.

Progressive Conservatives: "Discovery" math would be scrapped. Cellphones would be banned from all school classrooms. The PCs would make students in teachers' colleges take math classes. Standardized testing would be "fixed." The sex education curriculum would revert to the previous one until consultations helped devise an "age appropriate" curriculum. The party would earmark \$38 million more for kids with autism.

Where can I find the full party platforms? **Liberals:** The Ontario Liberal plan for care and opportunity,

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The Chronicle Journal: [Provincial Affairs HL: Cheat sheet helps voters cram for ballot test By Martin Regg Cohn THE bigg]; 2018.06.07

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle Journal
DATE: 2018.06.07
SECTION: Columns Comment.
KEYWORDS: provincial,affairs,cheat,sheet,helps,voters
WORD COUNT: 1212

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Provincial Affairs

HL: Cheat sheet helps voters cram for ballot test

By Martin Regg Cohn

THE biggest excuse people give for failing to vote? They don't know who or what to vote for. With the June 7 election here, there's still time to close our democratic deficit - by narrowing the knowledge gap. (Polls are open until 9 p.m. Eastern time.)

Herewith, a Voter's Guide. The goal is to help you decide for yourself where the parties stand, and where they duck.

This isn't an attempt to influence your vote, merely an effort to inform your choice. Make your decision based on your own inclinations, not my insinuations.

The good news: The campaign featured bold social policies for pharmacare, dental care and child care, though they may never come to pass.

The bad news: The parties' plans to pay for their promises don't quite add up - and in the case of the Progressive Conservatives, were never made public as promised.

The worst news: None of the above may matter, because this election is being fought mostly over personalities, not policies.

For better or for worse, here's how the major parties rank on five major issues facing the province in this election:

Energy

The politics of power rates are an election perennial, because Ontarians prefer to pay less than the true cost of generating electricity. Hence the Liberals' controversial pre-election plan to lower rates by 25 per cent by refinancing the costs through borrowings. Despite criticizing that scheme, the Tories would keep it in place, and then magically drive rates down by a further 12 per cent. The NDP counters that it would cancel the Liberal borrowing scheme (never mind the financial obligations), and then lower rates by an even more remarkable 30 per cent. New Democrats haven't explained how they would persuade the federal Liberals to remove the HST on hydro.

The partial privatization of Hydro One, Ontario's transmission utility, has been the Liberals' Achilles heel. PC Leader Doug Ford has mocked its highly paid CEO as the "Six Million Dollar Man" and vowed to fire him upon taking power, which requires terminating the entire board and paying out more than \$10.7 million in severance. NDP Leader Andrea Horwath claims she'll buy back all of Hydro One, costing as much as \$10 billion, using annual dividends of about \$250 million a year - numbers that don't add up. The Liberals paid a steep political price for privatization, but the PC and NDP plans could cost taxpayers dearly.

Environment

While this isn't a vote-determining issue for most, the distinct differences among the parties could have the greatest impact. Under the Liberals, Ontario joined a "cap and trade" market with Quebec and California to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by making polluters pay, raising billions of dollars for conservation, including mass transit. The impact at the pump is a mere 4.3 cents a litre (long since overshadowed by

increases in foreign oil prices) and adds about \$80 a year to natural gas bills.

The NDP largely supported the Liberal plan, but would allocate more to help communities adjust. The Green Party would keep it, but remove allowances for large industrial emitters. By contrast, Ford's Tories would eliminate cap and trade entirely, and have ruled out any form of carbon tax - setting the stage for a legal battle with Ottawa, which mandates carbon pricing by all provinces. This would make Ontario an environmental outlier and outlaw.

Fiscal and political accountability

If you believe in fiscal prudence, there is no optimal option in this campaign. After finally delivering a balanced budget last year, the Liberal fiscal plan plunges the province back into deficit - more than \$6 billion annually for the next three years - to bankroll child care and health-care increases. The NDP's financial plan initially came in lower, until they owned up to an awkward \$1.4-billion annual miscalculation that leaves them in roughly the same deficit league as the Liberals.

The biggest surprise is the Tories, who pride themselves on fiscal stewardship. Despite committing to a fully costed plan of his own, Ford hasn't delivered. He has laid out some \$10 billion in new programs and tax cuts, without showing where he'd make up the shortfalls - beyond an implausible plan to cut \$6 billion in unidentified "waste." Independent economists now say Ford's election plan could harm the provincial balance sheet most. Even the toughest fiscal hawk should be daunted by his lack of fiscal discipline.

Social programs

Pharmacare is finally here, but the Liberals and NDP have competing formulas for the drug formulary. The NDP proposes a partial pharmacare program covering all ages, but limited to the top 125 drugs. The Liberal program pays for all 4,400 drugs on the formulary, but only for those under 25 or over 65. Both have strengths and weaknesses, but easily beat the PC plan to avoid planning anything. The NDP would also extend dental benefits to all Ontarians (blended with private coverage), while the Liberals cap it at \$400 a person.

On child care, the NDP proposes free coverage for infants and toddlers up to age 2.5 if your family income is below \$40,000, with a sliding fee scale beyond that. Sounds good, but almost all experts point out there's not enough capacity to meet demand in that age group, implying massive wait lists. The Liberal plan focuses instead on free daycare for preschoolers (ages 2.5 to 4), which the system can handle - and there is every indication the NDP would have to switch to this approach. But all bets are off if the PCs win, as they are offering only modest tax breaks to defray the cost of child care - which would remain as unaffordable and unattainable as ever.

Leadership and accountability

Like Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne, Horwath has granted countless interviews and holds two or three news conferences daily on the campaign trail (and Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner will talk endlessly). By contrast, Ford has declined sit-down interviews with most major media outlets during the campaign, and limits himself to four or five questions once a day before his supporters drown out reporters with applause and cheers.

Horwath's ideological rigidity on strikes - saying she'd never legislate public sector workers back, no matter how long the disruption for students - is more rhetorical than realistic. Reluctant as she is to antagonize her union supporters in midcampaign, history shows other NDP governments across Canada have passed back-to-work legislation when it's in the public interest.

As the rookie leader, Ford has flailed in the televised debates, meandering and missing the point.

As the veteran leader, with nine years in the job, Horwath showed a command of the issues at the podium. While Wynne probably won the last debate, even she acknowledges it didn't boost her numbers because viewers had tuned her out.

All that said, seen and heard, take note: For many, the priority isn't policy but personality. It's a campaign that is as much about ensuring one party is the loser as it is about electing the winner.

Fair enough.

But before you vote strategically, choose substantively.

Martin Regg Cohn is a columnist for The Toronto Star. Email him at mcohn@thestar.ca.