

QP Briefing: March 20, 2017

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Date: Mon, 20 Mar 2017 17:05:50 -0400
Attachments: 20170320 - QP Briefing.doc (169.47 kB)

Q P B R I E F I N G

March 20, 2017

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Articles

1). Patrick Brown calls Liberals' Facts Still Matter campaign a

By: Sabrina Nanji

The Liberals' "Facts Still Matter in Ontario" campaign now has its very own website.

Factsstillmatter.ca is being managed by the Liberal Caucus Service Bureau and says it is currently tracking 121 "dubious statements" – in particular, those made by PC Leader Patrick Brown.

The website mostly features a grumpy-looking Brown under categories including Big Fib, Correction, Misrepresentation, False Claim, Old Classic and Award Winners. Some Tory caucus members also get a mention – new-ish energy critic Todd Smith is accused of "misleading since his first day on the job." PC MPP Rick Nicholls is called out for comments he made — and later apologized for and recanted at Brown's direction — that seemed to suggest the Tories would push so-called social conservative issues after forming government. Finance critic Vic Fedeli got the moniker "Fibbin' Fedeli" for suggesting further sell-off of Hydro One shares would continue to send hydro rates through the roof. The Liberals conveniently provide news releases and media reports in an attempt to debunk the opposition's claims.

The Liberal Party sent out a release touting its new website and Twitter handle Monday, saying they “developed these tools to document the misinformation that Patrick Brown has been spreading across Ontario, and challenge the myths in one place.” The party also invites the public to ask the party for clarification should they “encounter misinformation.”

Before that, the Liberals had sent similar fact-check releases to reporters almost daily.

Asked if the campaign was more of a partisan move, Deb Matthews, deputy premier and 2018 election campaign co-chair, said her party is presenting research in a way that “hasn’t been done before, but that’s part of keeping everybody accountable.”

“When Patrick Brown is talking about Ontario’s economic situation and he’s just wrong, the facts are just wrong, we thought, we have to get the facts out there,” Matthews said Monday after Question Period. “We can have lots of debate points, but when it comes to the facts, the facts are the facts.”

Brown accused the Liberals of playing games and called the campaign a partisan attack by a governing party that’s lagging in public opinion polls.

“They’re struggling to defend their own record. It’s very unusual when you see a government that is this low in public approval, and I think what their response is, rather than defend their own record, which they can’t, they choose to attack others,” Brown said.

“Whether they smear the PCs or smear the NDP, that’s their go-to position. When they can’t defend their own policies, they attack others, and I think it frankly says more about them.”

The Tories have hopped on the fact-checking train too, and put out releases accusing the premier’s “Pinocchio Government” of “spreading misinformation and alternative facts.”

Brown has also remarked the Liberals are not quite engaging in fake news, but “fake spin.”

“What else should we expect from a government and a caucus with the longest nose in our province’s history?” said a PC statement released on the first day of the spring sitting.

The PC’s own “Facts Still Matter in Ontario” campaign spans the Liberals’ energy and fiscal policies, the debate over winter hydro disconnections, and refers to Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault as “Captain Obvious” when discussing the 8-per-cent hydro sales tax rebate that took effect in Jan. 1.

The Tories also questioned Economic Development Minister Brad Duguid’s comments concerning criticism over investments made to MaRS Discovery District. Duguid later clarified and apologized to reporters for referencing “fake news” when he meant to refer to criticism from the opposition.

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2). Ontario calling on Ottawa to help slow down housing specu

By: Geoff Zochodne

Ontario’s Liberal government is encouraging its federal cousins to help curb speculation in the Greater Toronto Area’s scorching housing market by tweaking tax rules.

Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa said Monday morning during question period that he had penned a letter to federal Finance Minister Bill Morneau, asking Ottawa to consider new “options” to rein in real estate prices. Specifically, Sousa is suggesting the federal Liberal government increase the amount of capital gains tax an investor must pay on the sale of a home that’s not their primary residence.

“Recognizing that affordability issues in the city of Toronto and in the surrounding areas are a concern and have been for some time, and we are looking at a suite of options that may be available to us,” Sousa told reporters. “One of them is to look at speculation and the appropriate capital gains exemption that now exists on those speculators.”

Currently, investors must include 50 per cent of the profit they turn on selling a property in their taxable income (the capital gains tax). Increasing that, Sousa wrote to Morneau, "could reduce the incentive for people to make speculative purchases."

"What we're trying to do is calm the market in such a way as to ensure that there's sustainability over the long term," Sousa said. "We don't want to put anybody in harm's way, we want to ensure that we have more activity and minimizing any impact that comes, should it occur."

According to the Canadian Real Estate Association, average real estate prices in Ontario jumped by 24.5 per cent from February 2016 to February 2017. The prices are rising at a greater clip in the Greater Toronto Area, which saw a 27.8-per-cent increase from February 2016 to last month.

Sousa has said the government is collecting data to inform its moves and determine what is driving demand. Speculation is an "obvious" driver, he said, but so too is strong economic growth and immigration to Ontario.

Citing stories of furious bidding wars, Sousa also said recently he was reconsidering measures to cool the housing market, including a foreign buyers' tax, such as the one British Columbia has already implemented for the Vancouver area. B.C. Finance Minister Mike de Jong was at Queen's Park Monday, for a conversation with Sousa.

"He cited the fact that certainly in the city of Vancouver [the foreign homebuyers' tax] enabled an immediate pause on some foreign buy, but at the same time, it increased foreign buy in other parts of the province," Sousa said of his conversation with de Jong. "So we're taking a look at that too."

The Ontario opposition parties are not yet calling for a foreign buyers' tax, but they are sensing something needs to be done.

"A lot of people have their personal retirement plans in the value of their home and so there's concerns if you see a massive drop in prices," said PC Leader Patrick Brown. "I think the first thing the government could look at is the issue of supply, and I hope they will."

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath's party has been calling on the Liberal government to close a loophole that allows landlords to ask for uncapped rent increases on tenants living in building constructed after 1991. NDP MPP Peter Tabuns was set to table a private members' bill that would close that loophole on Monday, but Horwath said a foreign homebuyers' tax was also "one of the things that we need to look at."

"All of these things need to be on the table because we're in a crisis situation when it comes to resale homes," Horwath told reporters. "But we also know that there are effective things right now that can be done on the rental side."

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3). Tories cry contempt over ads promoting Liberal hydro plan

By: Geoff Zochodne

The Progressive Conservatives say advertisements promoting the Liberals' plan to cut hydro costs are putting the cart before the horse — and the government in contempt of provincial parliament.

PC House Leader Jim Wilson rose on a point of privilege Monday morning, accusing the government of committing a "prima facie" case of contempt against the legislature. The Grits did so, he alleged, because the new ads were broadcast before the Liberal government backed up their hydro plan with promised legislation, thereby insulting the legislature's role in the process.

"The advertising in question explicitly envisions a timeline and outcome for legislation which has yet to be introduced in the Legislature," said Wilson. "That is why, in all of our releases,

both sides of the House to this day from that ruling, we all say 'if passed by the Legislature.' This advertising makes no mention of 'if passed by this Legislature' in any of its forms, whether in social media or the radio."

One of the Liberal backgrounders outlining their "Fair Hydro Plan" says that the government "intends to introduce legislation" to refinance electricity generation costs.

"[The ads] are blatantly partisan, and [the Liberals] are littering radio stations and social media in a sad attempt to save this government's falling popularity," said PC Leader Patrick Brown during Monday's question period.

Premier Kathleen Wynne fired back that the Liberals had reformed the government ad rules after taking over for the Tories in 2003. Prior to the change, the first minister had been allowed to appear in ads, as ex-premier Mike Harris had done on occasion.

"Chaos was reigning, and the premier of the day had his face all over advertising," Wynne said. "We changed those rules."

The new ads targeted by the Tories inform radio listeners that they'll soon receive an average 25-per-cent cut to their electricity bill, which includes the 8-per-cent HST rebate the Liberals first promised last September. Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk, a frequent critic of the government's promotions, has already said the ads wouldn't have been approved by her office under the old rules, which the Liberals changed in 2015.

In defending themselves against the contempt charge, the Liberals maintain there is no bill in the house yet, and therefore, "no proceeding to obstruct," said Government House Leader Yasir Naqvi. The Liberal government also claims it has the right to implement its policies at its own pace.

"Given that there is no bill or proceeding before the House, the very premise of privilege does not exist," Naqvi added. "As part of its function, the government has a responsibility to raise awareness and communicate information about programs and services that affect Ontarians. This includes informing Ontarians of changes to their electricity bills so that they can use this information to plan for the future as they manage their household budgets."

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault, against whom the contempt allegation is specifically aimed, says the Liberal government has spent "under a million dollars" on the ad campaign thus far. He said the campaign would be "in line" with what the government has spent previously, and suggested this would mean radio, television, print and social media ads.

"The more I talk to people in the province about the programs that we have, it just reminds me that we need to continue to do more to let people know about these programs," Thibeault told reporters.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said the Liberals still haven't revealed their "phantom plan" to reduce hydro rates, but are still promoting their policies.

"Now they're once again using public money – public money – to buy advertising to help themselves politically as opposed to doing the right thing for the people of Ontario," Horwath said.

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4). Seen: New committee lineups set

By: Geoff Zochodne

After a brief March Break-related intermission, the Ontario legislature resumed sitting Monday morning.

Later in the day, the legislature's powers-that-be published an updated list of committee members, with only a few minor tweaks. The committee rosters are as follows:

Standing Committee on Estimates

Chair : NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo
Vice-Chair : NDP MPP Michael Mantha
Other members
Liberal MPP Bob Delaney
Liberal MPP Joe Dickson
PC MPP Michael Harris
Liberal MPP Sophie Kiwala
Liberal MPP Peter Milczyn
Liberal MPP Arthur Potts
PC MPP Todd Smith

Standing Committee on Justice Policy

Chair : Liberal MPP Shafiq Qaadri
Vice-Chair : Liberal MPP Lorenzo Berardinetti
Other members
Liberal MPP Mike Colle
Liberal MPP Nathalie Des Rosiers
PC MPP Jim McDonell
NDP MPP Michael Mantha
Liberal MPP Daiene Vernile
Liberal MPP Arthur Potts
PC MPP Bill Walker

Standing Committee on Social Policy

Chair : NDP MPP Peter Tabuns
Vice-Chair : NDP MPP Jagmeet Singh
Other members
Liberal MPP Lou Rinaldi
PC MPP Lorne Coe
Liberal MPP Vic Dhillon
Liberal MPP John Fraser
Liberal MPP Amrit Mangat
PC MPP Gila Martow
Liberal MPP Ted McMeekin

Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Chair : Liberal MPP Peter Milczyn
Vice-Chair : Liberal MPP Ann Hoggarth
Other members
Liberal MPP Yvan Baker
Liberal MPP Toby Barrett
Liberal MPP Han Dong
PC MPP Vic Fedeli
NDP MPP Catherine Fife
Liberal MPP Harinder Malhi
Liberal MPP Cristina Martins

Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly

Chair : PC MPP Monte McNaughton
Vice-Chair : PC MPP Laurie Scott
Other members
Liberal MPP Joe Dickson
PC MPP Bob Bailey
Liberal MPP Jim Bradley
Liberal MPP Harinder Malhi
Liberal MPP Sophie Kiwala
NDP MPP Michael Mantha
Liberal MPP Soo Wong

Standing Committee on General Government

Chair : Liberal MPP Grant Crack

Vice-Chair : Liberal MPP Granville Anderson

Other members

Liberal MPP Yvan Baker

Liberal MPP Mike Colle

Liberal MPP Nathalie Des Rosiers

Liberal MPP Ann Hoggarth

NDP MPP Lisa Gretzky

PC MPP Julia Munro

PC MPP Lisa Thompson

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Chair : Ernie Hardeman

Vice-Chair : Lisa MacLeod

Other members

Liberal MPP John Fraser

NDP MPP Percy Hatfield

Liberal MPP Monte Kwinter

Liberal MPP Bob Delaney

Liberal MPP Vic Dhillon

PC MPP Randy Hillier

Liberal MPP Han Dong

Standing Committee on Government Agencies

Chair : Liberal MPP Cristina Martins

Vice-Chair : Liberal MPP Daiene Vernile

Other members

Liberal MPP Jim Bradley

PC MPP Sam Oosterhoff

NDP MPP Wayne Gates

Liberal MPP Granville Anderson

Liberal MPP Amrit Mangat

PC MPP Randy Pettapiece

Liberal MPP Shafiq Qaadri

Standing Committee on Regulations and Private Bills

Chair : Liberal MPP Ted McMeekin

Vice-Chair : Liberal MPP Lou Rinaldi

Other members

Liberal MPP Lorenzo Berardinetti

Liberal MPP Grant Crack

NDP MPP Jennifer French

Liberal MPP Mario Sergio

PC MPP Jack MacLaren

Liberal MPP Soo Wong

PC MPP Jeff Yurek

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*5). Speaker orders 'life and fire safety review' after firefighte
leg*

By: Sabrina Nanji

Speaker Dave Levac on Monday ordered a "life and fire safety review" at the more than 120-year-old legislature after a reporter was accidentally locked in a room by a worker and had to be let out by Toronto Fire Services.

"It's now on the list of things to do, because I do not want anyone stuck in the building in a

locked room," Levac told reporters after Question Period. He said a locksmith was in the building to conduct a review on Friday and Monday, and gave their report to maintenance services.

According to Newstalk 1010, its reporter was trapped in the room because the locking mechanism violated Ontario's Fire Code. Deputy Fire Chief Jim Jessop told Newstalk it was replaced within 24 hours. Jessop added "a number of other doors" have similar locking mechanisms and "it is our expectation that these locks be replaced." Inspectors will reportedly be following up to ensure all doors at Queen's Park comply with the fire code.

When asked if such incidents were common, Levac said, "the short answer is no" and that the incident with the reporter "obviously slipped through."

"With a very old building like this, where there are historical fitting and fixtures in many places, it is important to constantly make upgrades and make sure that we keep up to modern standards," Levac said in a news release later that day.

The provincial fire code says a person must readily be able to open a door from the inside, to ensure people can exit quickly and safely in an emergency.

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