

QP Briefing: May 29, 2018

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Click links below to view article:

Articles

- [1\). NDP leader defends her hydro platform math from PC criticism](#)
- [2\). 'There wasn't Facebook when I was 20. Phew': Horwath defends another candidate as controversies mount for all parties](#)
- [3\). Former Liberal premier David Peterson drops in on NDP event](#)
- [4\). PC platform nowhere to be seen as election day nears](#)

Articles

1). NDP leader defends her hydro platform math from PC criticism

By: Jessica Smith Cross

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath defended her promise to lower Ontarians' hydro bills by 30 per cent – a claim the Progressive Conservatives say just doesn't add up.

The NDP platform makes this promise to voters: "We will cut hydro bills by 30 per cent and put Hydro One back in public hands." For details, it directs voters to read their full hydro plan on the party website – a plan the party created two years ago.

On Tuesday morning, two incumbent PC candidates – Lisa MacLeod and Todd Smith – held a press conference to highlight why they believe the 30 per cent promise doesn't add up. The claim comes after the NDP has taken considering criticism over a math mistake in its election platform.

"I have no idea what they're on about this time," Horwath said at her own presser on Tuesday morning. "But I can tell you our hydro plan has been online for well over two years. We're yet to see a plan of any kind from Ford, platform, hydro plan or otherwise."

The PCs listed numerous concerns with the NDP's hydro plan, beginning with the New Democrats' promise to cancel the Liberal government's Fair Hydro Plan – a system of borrowing that keeps residential rates artificially lower – by an average of 25 per cent – in the short term, before allowing them to rise again.

The NDP has promised to cancel the borrowing to save ratepayers from having to pay back as much debt, with interest, down the road.

However, the PCs argue that if the NDP cancels the plan immediately, rates will immediately jump by 25 per cent.

Asked on Tuesday how quickly the NDP would transition away from the Fair Hydro Plan borrowing – and if that means rates will spike – Horwath didn't answer directly, but spoke about getting to work on the hydro file immediately, if elected.

"In fact, that's one of the first things we're going to get working on, the minute we're given the opportunity, should the people put us in the position of government on June 7," she said. "We're going to start working on the hydro plan."

Should the NDP immediately stop the Fair Hydro Plan borrowing, the PCs said, the corresponding spike in rates would nearly cancel out the "alleged" 30 per cent savings the NDP has promised to find.

The PCs attacked the 30 per cent claim as well, noting the detailed documentation of the NDP plan actually only promised to find 17 per cent savings for most residential ratepayers, with only some ratepayers seeing "as much as" as a 30 per cent reduction in the bills.

However, that two-year-old plan is framed as providing a 30 per cent reduction in rates across the board – "Cutting Hydro bills by 30% for everyone" – in the party's election platform, with no actual change in policy.

Under the plan, the bulk of the savings – 13 per cent off all residential bills – was to come from removing the HST from residential bills.

But since then, Liberal government has removed the provincial portion of the HST from bills via a rebate. The NDP would also seek to remove the federal portion of the HST, another five per cent off total bills, but that would be contingent on a commitment from the federal government – which the PCs stressed the NDP does not have.

Another part of the NDP's hydro plan was to lower bills by about 3.2 per cent by ordering Hydro One to use a \$6.2-billion tax benefit to subsidize that company's customer's bills, but it's not clear that can be accomplished. Hydro One is fighting an Ontario Energy Board decision to pass on a portion of those savings to customers.

Other parts of the plan would only affect some customers.

The NDP says it would lower rates for many rural customers by flattening delivery fees, with the cost of that change offset by lowering fees Ontario Power Generation pays the provincial government. Meanwhile, the party's promise to end time-of-use pricing would lower bills for some people, but raise it for others. Some low-income families would benefit from a commitment to double Ontario Electricity Support Program benefit.

The PCs also criticized the NDP for being open to closing down the Pickering nuclear plant before 2024. However, the NDP hydro platform makes no firm commitment and instead calls for "an independent, fact-based evaluation of when to take Pickering offline."

Asked on Tuesday if her plan to lower rates by 30 per cent is still achievable – given everything that has changed since it was initially released – Horwath didn't directly answer.

"The thing that hasn't changed is people can't pay their bills," she said. "The thing that hasn't changed is that the Liberals increased hydro bills by 300 per cent. The thing that hasn't changed is we still have unfair delivery charges, we still have oversupply in the system. We still have profits that are being made hand over fist that we are going to cap. There are a lot of

things in our hydro system that can be changed so it operates in the best interest of people again."

Over the long term, the NDP proposes to lower bills by taking costs out of the electricity system and capping private profit margins in the electricity sector, Horwath said.

She also reiterated the promise to reverse the sell-off of Hydro One by committing all dividends from the province's remaining shares to rebuying Hydro One shares, which the PCs are criticizing as impracticable.

"I am not going to give up on Ontario's hydro system," Horwath said. "I'm not going to give up on the people of Ontario who want our hydro system back in public hands and, most importantly, they want it to be affordable. Affordable hydro that we own more of and that's what New Democrats are going to bring."

The PCs, however, estimate it will take the NDP 30 years to buy the company back under their current plan.

"Nobody said it would be easy and nobody knows said it would be quick," Horwath said. "But what we know for sure is this is an achievable goal. All you have to do is look at companies that have gone out to the market and sold shares and have become that type of corporation and then have turned around and gone to sole ownership again. These are companies like Heinz, like Panara Bread, like Dell computers.

"So this is not an impossible dream, it's an achievable plan."

[Top](#)

2). 'There wasn't Facebook when I was 20. Phew': Horwath def controversies mount for all parties

By: Jessica Smith Cross

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said on Tuesday she probably did some things when she was 20 she now regrets – and expressed relief that Facebook wasn't around at the time.

Her rivals have increasingly been digging up controversial social media posts by NDP candidates as the party has risen in the polls. On Tuesday, the Toronto Sun published a story that said Gurratan Singh – brother of federal NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh and the current NDP candidate in Brampton East – had marched with a sign in 2006 that said, "Fuck the police."

Singh has apologized to police officers and said he's deeply ashamed of holding the placard. Horwath said on Tuesday morning the sign had an "abhorrent" and "despicable" message, but said it matters that her candidate has changed over the past 12 years.

"He's very regretful that he held that sign a number of years ago," she said. "Look, Gurratan has changed his life around since his early 20s when he was holding that sign. He, in fact, then went to law school and now actually upholds the law and justice system as opposed to rallying against it."

Asked about the issue again later in the day, she stressed that people make mistakes when they're young that they can come to regret.

"You know what? When I was 20, there's things I probably did that I regret," she said, immediately declining to tell the press what those things were.

"It's not on Facebook though – there wasn't Facebook when I was 20. Phew."

Meanwhile, Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne and MPP Eleanor McMahon called on Horwath to drop Singh as a candidate, with McMahon saying she found the photo of Singh especially upsetting because her late husband was a police officer.

But Horwath said she "absolutely" supports Singh.

She also said all of her candidates have pledged to uphold her party's vision. "What we know for sure is our candidates are absolutely committed to making life better for Ontarians and being absolutely solid when it comes to the commitments in our platform, because that's what people tell us they want us to address."

Horwath also criticized Ford and his party for "throwing a heck a lot of mud around" and going back 10 to 12 years on social media to find damaging things about NDP candidates.

"If that's how he wants to spend his time and how his team wants to spend their time, then they have at it," she said, before launching a broadside against the PCs.

"But I can tell you for sure my candidates, after this election, are not likely to be before judges having to answer to possible identity-theft charges," referring to the PCs' former candidate in Brampton East, who dropped out amid allegations he was tied to a theft of personal information from the company that runs the 407, and the NDP's concern that information may have been used by other Tory candidates.

"Mr. Ford does have that problem."

The NDP is not the only party with problematic candidates.

On Monday, the Liberals apologized for incumbent candidate Shafiq Qaadri, who interrupted one of Horwath's press conferences that morning.

Meanwhile, PC candidate Donna Skelly defended herself from an allegation that she supported an alt-right media outlet associated with white supremacists including Paul Fromm. Press Progress published a picture of her holding a hat with the media outlet's name while speaking at an event for young conservatives as well as a Facebook post that thanked her for giving a "shout out" to the media outlet.

"To clarify, I was invited to a Christmas party by Mohawk McMaster Young Conservatives," Skelly tweeted. "I mingled with the crowd was handed a hat on my way to podium after speaking to a young man. I had never met him or heard of this group before. I stayed for 20 minutes and left before he spoke."

"I have always denounced hateful and harmful acts and words. They have no place in our Party and no place anywhere in Ontario."

[Top](#)

3). Former Liberal premier David Peterson drops in on NDP event

By: Jessica Smith Cross

STRATFORD — Former Premier David Peterson dropped in on an NDP campaign event in Stratford on Tuesday afternoon – making him the second Liberal in as many days to perform an unexpected cameo in Andrea Horwath's election road show.

"I was just walking by and thought, 'What the hell, if there's a party going on, I'm there,'" Peterson said, getting a warm greeting from the NDP leader.

On Monday, incumbent Etobicoke North Liberal Shafiq Qaadri apologized after making an unexpected appearance at one of Horwath's events – but unlike Peterson, Qaadri had come bearing election signs and interrupted Horwath as she spoke with the press.

The appearance of the former premier might be considered a good omen for the Dippers – Peterson went from holding the biggest majority in history to losing not only government, but his own seat, too, when the NDP surged to its first Ontario win in 1990.

But Peterson told the press there are no similarities between the 1990 campaign and this one.

"Our campaign fell apart at the end," he said. "This one was different from the beginning."

He acknowledged that voters can build up resentment about the government of the day.

"I think things are still shifting, shifting around," he said. "I have won going in 20 behind and I have lost going in 20 points ahead."

Peterson said he believes the Liberal vote will shore up closer to election day. "This is a very human business, so at the end of the day they take a look at you and say, if they don't like you, and say, 'Who's the least worst?' Who's the most substantive and knows what they're doing?' And people confront reality when they vote. They don't just have the luxury of being critical."

He lauded Liberal Leader Kathleen Wynne's debate performance.

"People have the luxury of going up and down in their views, and that's part of democracy," he said, "but my sense is people are drifting back and saying, 'Look at the other ones.' They've had a good look at (PC Leader Doug Ford), they've had a good look at the NDP, and they're saying, 'Look, she looks pretty good in comparison.'"

Peterson has been quite critical of the NDP in the past, including in a recent interview on the QP Briefing podcast.

[Top](#)

4). PC platform nowhere to be seen as election day nears

By: David Hains

PORT COLBORNE—It is E-minus nine and the PC platform is still at large.

PC Leader Doug Ford faced more questions at a Port Colborne retirement home about when his platform would come out, how he would pay for myriad promises and whether he had a plan at all.

"We're going to move this province forward," Ford said, standing behind a placard the read "support our seniors," as he made the pitch that he is the only one that would protect their pocketbooks.

The NDP pushed back against Ford's claims that he was looking out for voters.

"I think not only is it shameful that they haven't put a platform out, but it's insulting to voters. I mean, people are already at the polls, folks are already voting in the advance polls," said NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, whose party is neck-and-neck with Ford's PCs in most opinion polls. "Nine days left, Mr. Ford, where's your platform? Show it to the people, they deserve to see it."

At his presser, Ford took aim at Horwath. "Andrea Horwath has a platform that doesn't add up," he said, mentioning proposed deficits and higher taxes. "When Andrea Horwath says she wants to help, make sure you read the fine print," he warned the group of seniors. "Again, we have a plan," Ford insisted. "By the end of this campaign, we will have a fully costed platform, unlike the NDP," he said, even though the New Democrats released their fully costed platform, which contained some accounting errors, on April 16.

One senior did not appreciate the event, shouting "you're late," as the Tory leader appeared 23 minutes behind schedule. Another senior left the event before it began, as the delayed start ran into their lunchtime.

The PC leader proved evasive when asked about the absence of his platform, saying it would be provided "by election day," but not giving a date.

Instead, he referred voters to the PCs' website, where a section labelled "Platform" lists his campaign pledges – without giving any detailed information about them – and collects data from voters.

"My friends, go on OntarioPC.com, you're going to see our plan, it's a great plan, a plan for the people," he said, incorrectly stating the name of the website, OntarioPC.ca.

The website does not contain details on how Ford and the PCs will pay for their promises and the description of Tory policies is sparse. The section on balancing the budget contains 20 words, saying, "Our kids shouldn't have to pay for Kathleen Wynne's mistakes. It's time to respect the taxpayer and balance the budget!" The section on carbon pricing contains 16 words, saying, "The carbon tax is a job-killer. We should be creating jobs in Ontario, not killing them." Ontario does not have a carbon tax, but has cap-and-trade instead. Including headlines, the entire "platform" as constituted contains 668 words.

Ford also called his plan "modest," although an accounting of the various promises from the three parties by economist Mike Moffatt projects the PCs to run the highest deficit, given their additional revenue cuts and new spending.

Defending himself against questions focused on the lack of available details Ford falsely said multiple times in his remarks that every announcement he has made has had a price tag attached to it, "Every single day we put a cost beside our plan," he said.

His April 20 announcement to accelerate the build-out of long-term care beds did not come with any cited financial information. The People's Guarantee, the discarded Patrick Brown platform, stated that doing so would cost \$77 million. A similar promise by the NDP puts the number at \$2.1 billion, which uses a similar cost-per bed amount as the Liberal announcement. Asked by QP Briefing how much this particular promise would cost, the PC campaign did not respond in time for this story.

The Liberal war room criticized the lack of a PC platform by creating one for him, based on previous Tory statements, and put it up online at dougfordcostedplatform.ca. Putting the mock in mock-up, the site adds up Ford's various promises, which the Liberals put at \$40-billion.

-with files from Jessica Smith Cross

[Top](#)