

Polling shows hydro was No. 1 concern in Ontario long before relief...

From: Command News <fp.news.killornb@commandnews.com>
To: "Killorn, Bill (OPO)" <bill.killorn@ontario.ca>
Date: Mon, 27 Mar 2017 14:54:11 -0400

Profile: KILLORNB / My Drawer / Kathleen Wynne - Clip 16 (limit 30)
Mar 27 2017 14:54:00 - Source: CP [The Canadian Press]

Polling shows hydro was No. 1 concern in Ontario long before relief announced (Ont-Hydro-Polling)
By Allison Jones

THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO _ Ontario's government learned from its own polling that the rising cost of hydro was people's top concern 10 months before the Liberals publicly acknowledged it and announced an eight-per-cent reduction on electricity bills.

The government-commissioned polling from 2013 to 2016 _ examined by The Canadian Press _ tells a tale of increasing distress about hydro rates over months, even years before across-the-board relief was introduced.

Monthly tracking shows that in December 2013, the cost of electricity became the worst-ranked issue based on performance, with 70 per cent of respondents saying the government was on the wrong track.

Specific questions on electricity appear in July 2014 and again in March 2015, when polling found most people had done something in the past year to make their homes more energy efficient, and a majority supported the often-maligned time-of-use pricing.

Then in November 2015, electricity _ and the privatization of Hydro One _ surged to become a top issue of concern in the province, with 13 per cent of respondents saying it should be the government's top priority, over perennial concerns such as health, jobs, the economy and education.

In just one month, the percentage of respondents who rated the government's performance on controlling electricity prices as poor jumped from 38 per cent in October to 47 per cent in November.

By January 2016, jobs, the economy and health took over as areas of greater concern for the next few months, but the Gandalf Group polling told the government that controlling electricity prices was among its main perceived weaknesses and communications should focus on it.

Government responses to opposition questions about rising hydro bills over much of the 2013 to 2016 time frame focused on defending the cost of hydro as the result of building a clean and reliable system, while highlighting measures the government had already taken to lower consumer costs, such as a low-income support program and removing the debt retirement charge.

It wasn't until a Sept. 1 byelection loss that the government's

tune changed.

“We heard at the door that hydro rates are increasingly challenging for people,” Premier **>Kathleen Wynne<** said in a statement that night. “I understand, as do my ministers, that the government needs to focus on helping people with their everyday expenses.”

Deputy Progressive Conservative leader Steve Clark said only when the Liberals’ political fortunes were at risk did they take hydro costs seriously.

“Once the Liberal brand lost a seat that they had held for decades, they finally listened to the opposition and started to make some changes,” he said.

The inclusion of the eight-per-cent rebate in the government’s throne speech less than two weeks later suggests the plan was already well developed by Sept. 1. But the premier has acknowledged she should have acted sooner, a spokeswoman said.

In question period Monday, the premier listed measures that were enacted earlier, such as reducing feed-in-tariff prices, renegotiating a green energy deal with Samsung, deferring new nuclear construction and delaying the start of other nuclear refurbishment, all of which save the system billions.

Wynne also mentioned the removal of the debt retirement charge, as well as a low-income support program and one for rural residents introduced in March 2015.

“That was a direct recognition that people were paying too much on their electricity bills and a direct support for people who were paying too much on their electricity bills, particularly low-income families,” Wynne said.

While Wynne’s eight-per-cent rebate was welcomed _ almost 90 per cent of respondents in October supported it _ it didn’t resonate quite as widely as the government likely hoped. Still only 36 per cent said the government was doing a good job of controlling electricity prices.

“Of utmost importance to Ontarians for government’s attention is electricity costs,” the polling research said.

“And, evaluations of the government’s performance at controlling electricity prices are worsening. Those who report being more familiar with government’s recent eight-per-cent reduction of electricity prices are also more likely to evaluate the government poorly on this issue. Essentially, the solution is not proportionate to the perceived magnitude of the problem.”

Fast-forward to March 2017 and the premier announced a further 17-per-cent average reduction on bills, holding increases to the rate of inflation for four years, cuts to delivery charges for some rural customers, eliminating the delivery charge for on-reserve First Nations customers, expanding a low-income support program and establishing a new home energy efficiency improvement fund.

Angus Reid polling conducted after that announcement found that Wynne’s popularity continued to plummet to record lows, but 62 per cent of respondents said the reduction in hydro bills would be an important factor in deciding how they’ll vote in next year’s election.

The polling was conducted until October 2015 by Pollara, and from then on by the Gandalf Group.

INDEX: UTILITIES ONTARIO POLITICS

Visit thecanadianpress.com for more services from The Canadian Press, Canada's trusted news leader.