

thunder bay paper

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The Chronicle Journal: Ontario Liberals gunning hard; 2017.05.16

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Ontario Liberals gunning hard

Ontario's Liberals are fighting back against bad press from a long string of missteps that have caused their popularity to slump. Things are so bad that the relatively unknown opposition Progressive Conservatives would win an election if it were held today. That's a big if and the Liberals are nothing if not experienced campaigners.

In a series of strong pushbacks the government has put Premier Kathleen Wynne - who is the least popular major party leader - front and centre in hopes of making the case for a party that does, finally, get it. Hard-pressed middle-class residents and Northerners are particular targets as the party seeks to regain its footing just over a year out from the next election.

The first reversal of policy - and, they hope, fortune - came out of political necessity following years of soaring hydro bills exacerbated by revelations of exporting Ontario electricity to U.S. customers at a fraction of the price here.

Outrageous salaries in the hydro empire soured Ontarians even more. So Wynne has announced a series of moves that will save customers 25 per cent on their bills -Émore for those in rural areas - though the legislation has to be formalized, likely this week. Unfortunately for the Liberals, someone has since leaked a cabinet memo outlining high customer bills later to pay for savings today. Hard-pressed consumers will have to decide if they care more about themselves or those who will be buying hydro years from now while Liberals will be praying green energy finally does lower the overall cost. That Ontario presses ahead with exorbitant nuclear plant refurbishings while Manitoba offers hydro-electricity at a fraction of the cost seems to be lost on the Liberals.

Next came a particularly bold move by the premier putting Northern Ontario First Nations on notice that if they don't finally get on board with the long-delayed Ring of Fire mineral boom she will work only with those who are willing to get on board with a road into the region to get the minerals out. Getting First Nations to sign off on the North's biggest economic opportunity in decades has been a frustrating exercise such that the project's original main player pulled out. Other companies are poised to mine but First Nations consultations have dragged on while Ontario has waited to spend a promised \$1 billion to open the region - and many of its First Nations - to a transportation corridor. Many Ontarians are quietly cheering Wynne's newfound determination to capitalize on a promised successor to the North's shrunken forest industry.

Third, the Liberals are announcing this week labour reforms including a big increase in the minimum wage that, according to our Queen's Park correspondent Martin Regg Cohn today "could soon target companies relying unfairly on part-time or contract work that deprives many Ontarians of decent wages from steady employment." Stark unevenness in income and employment opportunities have millions of people dejected. This is a big step to begin to fix the larger issue of inequality in society.

The timing of these moves could be seen as desperation by a Liberal government on the ropes. Together with news of a balanced budget and a surging Ontario economy, they might just be the beginning of one of the unlikeliest political survival stories in recent memory.

The party has to contend with an NDP that has also found a second wind under a seemingly revitalized leader in Andrea Horwath, and an official opposition PC party under largely unknown Patrick Brown that has yet to announce policy beyond a traditional Tory pro-business slant. But every Liberal government initiative that gives middle- and lower-class Ontarians a sense of relief, and hope, puts the party that much closer to a fifth term in office.

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