

FYI- QP Briefing: Six Things to Watch During Queen's Park's 'Antepenultimate' Sitting

From: "Kucherenko, Carly (TBS)" <carly.kucherenko@ontario.ca>
To: "@TBS-L-Issues and Media" <tbs-l-issuesandmedia@msgov.gov.on.ca>, "Balgobin, Sueanne (TBS)" <sueanne.balgobin@ontario.ca>, "Cabell, Jonathan (TBS)" <jonathan.cabell@ontario.ca>, "Cusumano, Josephine (TBS)" <josephine.cusumano@ontario.ca>, "Eastwood, Alexander (TBS)" <alexander.eastwood@ontario.ca>, "MacIntyre, Kyle (TBS)" <kyle.macintyre@ontario.ca>, "Nelson, Dane (TBS)" <dane.nelson@ontario.ca>, "Simone, Nicole (TBS)" <nicole.simone@ontario.ca>, "Ostergard, Matt (TBS)" <matt.ostergard@ontario.ca>, "Prins, Sebastian (TBS)" <sebastian.prins@ontario.ca>, "Tedesco, Lauren (TBS)" <lauren.tedesco@ontario.ca>
Cc: "Ovenden, Erin (TBS)" <erin.ovenden@ontario.ca>, "Hosick, Sarah (TBS)" <sarah.hosick@ontario.ca>, "Laughton, Patrick (TBS)" <patrick.laughton@ontario.ca>, "Spadoni, Peter (MOF)" <peter.spadoni@ontario.ca>, "Pichette, Marc (MOF)" <marc.pichette@ontario.ca>, "Blodgett, Scott (MOF)" <scott.blodgett@ontario.ca>
Date: Fri, 17 Feb 2017 16:02:26 -0500

FYI This was just posted on QP Briefing.

SIX THINGS TO WATCH DURING QUEEN'S PARK'S 'ANTEPENULTIMATE' SITTING

HOME NEWS SIX THINGS TO WATCH DURING QUEEN'S PARK'S 'ANTEPENULTIMATE' SITTING

Six things to watch during Queen's Park's 'antepenultimate' sitting

17.02.2017 Geoff Zochodne

Like birds returning north after their winter migration to warmer climes, MPPs will be back at Queen's Park next Tuesday to resume this session of provincial parliament.

As Premier **Kathleen Wynne** put it earlier this week, this will be the "antepenultimate" sitting at the Ontario legislature before the provincial election in 2018. After a quick look at a dictionary, *QP Briefing* can confirm this means there are likely three more sitting periods before next year's trip to the polls, including the one that starts Tuesday.

And, in other words, it's crunch time for Wynne and the other politicians at Queen's Park.

To get you up to speed before the legislature returns, *QP Briefing* has a primer on what to watch for amid the madness.

Hydro, hydro, hydro, hydro, hydro, hydro, hydro, hydro – oh, and did we mention hydro?

This won't shock you – pun totally intended – but this coming sitting is going to go heavy (again) on the hydro debates.

Electricity prices have become the preeminent political issue in Ontario. The Liberals tried to tamp down the outcry last September by announcing a new 8-per-cent rebate and more help for rural customers, but it appears that didn't totally take with voters.

So what are the Liberals going to do about it? Premier Wynne said this week there's going to be a "package of changes" coming before the budget, including some pieces that may require new legislation.

"As we go into this session, yes, the budget is the project that we're focusing on," Wynne said during a press conference at Queen's Park. "But within that context, we're talking about how do we lower people's electricity bills? How do we deal with the reality that electricity bills for many people in the province are not affordable? And we'll be bringing a plan forward actually before the budget but it will be part of the budget cycle."

Wynne has hinted that package will have something in it for people living in northern and rural communities, as well as low-income Ontarians who may be, the Premier says, forced to choose between paying the rent and paying their hydro bill. Wynne's public comments have also suggested the government is looking at the delivery charge all electricity customers pay. The global adjustment fee is reportedly in play as well.

The opposition parties have been mostly content to this point to just lob criticisms at the Liberals. But with an election 17 months out, rumblings of policy have begun to be heard.

NDP Leader **Andrea Horwath** confirmed as much at her start-of-sitting press conference Friday, saying her party will cough up a "full" plan to reduce hydro rates. "I have no doubt in my mind that it can be done," Horwath said Friday at Queen's Park.

PC Leader **Patrick Brown**, meanwhile, says one of his party's policy advisory council's are crafting their own energy platform. Most of what Brown's suggested publicly so far is that the Tories would look for escape clauses in the green energy contracts that the Liberal government has already signed. Both opposition parties were against the Hydro One initial public offering.

It's easy to just oppose – and probably fun, too – but the NDP and Tories say they've got ideas about how they'd fix this hydro hullabaloo. Time will tell.

A balanced budget in our time

The curious case of the Liberal government picking a fight with the auditor general over – of all things – the accounting treatment afforded to two jointly-sponsored public-sector pension plans can be easily explained: the Grits have vowed to table a balanced budget this year.

Yes, 2017-18 is when the government aims to get out of the red and into the black. The provincial budget is expected some time this spring, barring any surprises.

And that balanced budget is a promise the Liberals have continuously vowed to keep. Ahead of it presumably coming to fruition, the government has also grow more generous with its spending.

Recent contract extensions agreed to with education-sector unions contain 4-per-cent pay increases over two years. Civil servants are getting a raise after a longstanding wage freeze. Broader public sector executives are lining up for salary hike – which actually caused the government to balk.

But all of this is to say that the Liberals, once fond of touting "net-zero" collective bargaining, have money to spend. Or at least they feel richer.

At any rate, it frees up the government to spring for the aforementioned hydro rate help or big, splashy, election-time announcements.

Wynne said the government would also have its eye on education and health care in this next sitting. On the former, the Liberals are in the thick of implementing their pledge to add 100,000 licensed child-care spaces in the province. On the latter, Wynne said the government wants to ensure people have solid access to primary health care.

“We know that the system works for many people in the province but there are some people who are still working to find that care,” she said this week.

Who's coming with me?

There's going to be at least one byelection in 2017, prompted by last December's resignation of veteran Sault Ste. Marie MPP **David Oraziotti**. Could another be in the cards?

Furthermore, the Progressive Conservatives have gone on a nomination spree in recent months, with more than 40 candidates already tapped for the 2018 provincial election. The NDP have one candidate nominated for the next election. The Liberals, however, have no one nominated yet.

Now is the time for incumbent MPPs and cabinet ministers to decide if they'll take another kick at the can. Not everyone may want to do so, and the coming months will reveal who's in and who's out.

But, for now, one can only speculate.

Any more so-con surprises?

The Progressive Conservatives, led by Patrick Brown, are currently cruising atop the public opinion polls. This next election's sewn up, right?

Well, about that. If the recent history of Ontario politics has proven anything it's that campaigns really, really matter. Two tries by **Tim Hudak** to put the PCs in power broke down mid-campaign. **John Tory** had a similar experience over faith-based school funding.

Brown has never led a party into a general election, but his campaign skills were somewhat proven when he snatched the PC leadership away from more experienced competitors. Candidates are now lining up behind him for 2018, and nomination contests have, at times, been controversial.

While the nominations have produced some awkward moments, Brown landed in an uncomfortable situation last year when a letter bearing his signature vowed to “scrap” the province's sex-ed curriculum. To spare you all the specifics, Brown succeeded in alienating some social conservatives who had supported his leadership campaign and gave the Liberals ammunition in raising questions about Brown's agenda.

Brown quickly tried to snuff out those problems by declaring he supports the sex-ed curriculum in a *Toronto Star* op-ed.

And then, young **Sam Oosterhoff** shocked the establishment and bested PC Party President **Rick Dykstra** and others in winning the nomination for the Niagara West-Glanbrook byelection. Oosterhoff was open in his pro-life stance, which raised questions again about where the Tories were heading. He easily won the byelection and now sits on the Tory benches.

In the wake of all this, Brown said during a December media availability that PC candidates who wanted to come to Queen's Park to push “divisive” social issues need not apply.

And then, a recording of PC MPP **Rick Nicholls** surfaced, wherein Nicholls said those same issues were important to the Tories. But first, we have to get elected, Nicholls told a group at

Queen's Park. The Liberals pounced, and all the same questions of Brown had to be asked again.

Brown is in the pole position heading into this sitting. But nothing is guaranteed, with a long way to go before 2018.

And there are still a few issues that could trip up the Tories in the legislature.

Don't forget about the health care

Reform is afoot in the health-care sector.

When the legislature gets back to business there will be two important health-care bills ready for second reading. Bill 81, the *Medical Assistance in Dying Statute Law Amendment Act*, amends different areas of Ontario law — including the *Coroners Act* and the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act* to accommodate the change in federal law with respect to assisted death. The Progressive Conservatives have some concerns about conscience rights for doctors, and may seek to have them addressed with this bill.

Bill 87, the *Protecting Patients Act*, is somewhat of an omnibus health bill that deals with a number of issues, including requiring parents to complete an immunization education session before filing a statement of conscience or religious belief. But the section that changes the way the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario handles sexual assault allegations may prove to be the most controversial. It allows the suspend a doctor following the receipt of a complaint until it's resolved and expands the grounds for mandatory revocation a doctor's licence in sexual abuse cases. Some doctors have characterized the bill as an innocent-until-proven-guilty approach that puts doctors' livelihoods at risk.

Health Minister **Eric Hoskins** has also announced he plans to introduce another bill aimed at strengthening long-term care home inspections.

Meanwhile, the folding of the province's Community Care Access Centres (CCACs) into the Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) is going to roll out over the sitting. Keep an eye out for the severance paid to departing CCAC executives, and a continuing battle over how to run home-care more efficiently and effectively in Ontario.

Then there's the budget. Health spending increases have been restrained in recent years. While fighting with the federal government over the Canada Health Transfer, the provincial government has warned that 5.2 per cent increases in health spending will be necessary in coming years, yet the Ontario government has restrained its health spending increases to less than three-per cent in recent years, causing some questions about the sustainability of spending restraint.

And, lest we forget, the province's doctors have been working without a contract for more than three years. Wynne and Co. [say they're ready to resume negotiations](#).

Will Jagmeet jump?

At the moment, it would appear the world is **Jagmeet Singh**'s oyster.

He's being profiled left, right and in [GQ](#). He's a Snapchat legend around the legislature. One can't blame him for soaking it all in.

But the deputy leader of the Ontario NDP must, at some point, decide if he will run for the leadership of the federal New Democrats.

Singh is one of the biggest assets for the Ontario NDP, but he's also getting a strong push to go federal. In Ontario, the governing Liberals are down in polls and could be vulnerable to the NDP outflanking them on the left. In Ottawa, the NDP are looking to get away from the **Tom Mulcair**

legacy.

Singh could actually do both: take a crack at the leadership, and then, if he comes up short, come back to Queen's Park. Andrea Horwath said Friday she'd told Singh that she's got to be the first one to know when he makes a decision.

But he'll have to make that decision first.

- *With files from Jessica Smith Cross*

To contact the reporter on this story:

gzychodne@qpbriefing.com

416-212-5913

Twitter: [@geoffzychodne](https://twitter.com/geoffzychodne)