

Orangeville: Dufferin-Caledon MPP tables bill to curb ‘partisan’ government advertising

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At Queen’s Park on Monday (March 27), Jones introduced Bill 112, which the local MPP said seeks to amend the Government Advertising Act and restore the Auditor General’s oversight of government advertising.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones is demanding more scrutiny be applied to taxpayer-funded advertising, just days after Ontario’s Auditor General described a series of ads promoting a promised 25 per cent hydro rate cut as a “pat on the back” for the Liberal government.

“The government is spending taxpayer dollars on an advertising campaign on their latest hydro scheme in an attempt to save their electoral fortunes,” Jones argued. “This government refuses to respect taxpayer dollars.”

The latest set of ads in question include the line “we’ve heard you,” a reference to complaints about high electricity prices, and promise hydro rates won’t rise by more than the rate of inflation for at least four years.

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault’s office has defended the commercials airing across Ontario, explaining 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.”

Conversely, Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown has argued “these ads serve a partisan purpose that aims to improve the government’s standing among the public using taxpayer dollars.”

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"These hydro ads are not the first time this government has funded partisan ads through taxpayer funds," Jones charged. "You changed the legislation to make the Auditor General a rubber stamp."

In 2004, the Auditor General was given veto power over government advertising to eliminate partisan messaging at the taxpayers' expense. However, the government watered down those powers in 2015, which Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk has said in the past "likely" prompted the Wynne administration to do more advertising.

"The Auditor General has also spoken out on a series of advertising campaigns that over the last two years have cost taxpayers nearly \$6 million," Jones said. "The Auditor General has said that these recent hydro advertisements would not have been approved under old legislation."

In response to Jones' comments during Question Period, Treasury Board President Liz Sandals noted the Ontario legislature is the only government in Canada that actually has an act that lays out advertising rules.

"We need a little bit of a reality check here," she countered. "The ads in question follow the legislation, are consistent with the rules and the budget has been set out by the legislature, and they are not in contempt of the legislature."

Government House Leader Yasir Naqvi reminded Jones that her party's government ran about \$400 million worth of advertising under former premier Mike Harris.

Once the Liberals gained power, Naqvi said legislation was passed to "ensure that we do not have that kind of Mike Harris-style government advertising." He also noted the PCs and NDP both voted against it.

“Why did you not support that bill, which creates one of the most strict and most stringent regulations on government advertising in Canada?” Naqvi asked on Monday. “We’re the only legislature that has a law like this. They have very little ground to stand on.”

To view Jones’ petition calling on the government to restore the Auditor General’s oversight over government advertising, click [HERE](#).

— *With files from the Toronto Star*