

MEDIA SCAN: HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

March 17, 2017

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ONLINE COVERAGE

GOVERNMENT ADS ABOUT HYDRO BILL REDUCTIONS A 'PAT ON THE BACK': AUDITOR (ONT-HYDRO-ADS)

Canadian Press

12:45 pm March 17, 2017

TORONTO _ Ontario's auditor general says new ads from the Liberal government about its plan to cut hydro bills could be considered partisan.

The series of two taxpayer-funded ads, running on radio stations across the province, tells listeners that people will receive an average of 25 per cent off their hydro bills this summer and rate increases are being held to inflation for four years.

Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk says the ad likely wouldn't have passed under previous rules about government advertising.

The Liberals changed the criteria in 2015 and Lysyk said the new rules remove her discretionary power to approve or reject ads as partisan, reducing her office to a rubber stamp.

She says the hydro bill ads are a ``pat-on-the-back" style of advertisement, conveying a positive impression of the current government.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown has written a letter to Treasury Board President Liz Sandals, saying the government has ``no authority to be spending hard-earned taxpayer dollars on partisan" ads to promote a plan that hasn't passed the legislature or even been tabled.

**CTV NEWS: GOVERNMENT ADS ABOUT HYDRO BILL CUTS COULD BE CONSIDERED
PARTISAN: AUDITOR**

By: Allison Jones

March 17, 2017

<http://toronto.ctvnews.ca/government-ads-about-hydro-bill-cuts-could-be-considered-partisan-auditor-1.3329570>

TORONTO -- New taxpayer-funded ads from the Ontario Liberal government about its plan to cut hydro bills could be considered partisan, the auditor general said Friday.

The two ads, running on radio stations across the province, tell listeners that people will receive an average of 25 per cent off their hydro bills this summer and rate increases are being held to inflation for four years.

"Ontario has made important investments in clean, reliable energy," the narrator says in one ad. "This has led to hydro bills that have become harder to pay. We've heard you and we're taking action with the fair hydro plan."

The Progressive Conservatives say the purpose of the ads appear to be to raise the government's standing in the eyes of voters, at a time when anger over rising electricity costs has contributed to their decline in the polls.

The ads likely wouldn't have been approved under old government advertising rules, said auditor general Bonnie Lysyk, who has said changes the Liberals enacted in 2015 reduced her office to a rubber stamp.

"Under the previous legislation it would likely not have passed because it does convey a positive impression of the current government and it's more like a pat-on-the-back type of advertisement," she said.

A spokesman for Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said the ads inform people and direct them to a website where they can learn more about the upcoming changes.

"The Ontario government has a responsibility to raise awareness and communicate information about programs and services that affect Ontarians," Colin Nekolaichuk said in a statement. "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."

Lysyk said in her last annual report that she had cautioned the government that changing the rules would end up giving taxpayers the bill for millions of dollars in partisan advertising. "Sure enough, the government walked right through that open door," she said.

The old rules banned ads as partisan if the intent was to foster a positive impression of government or a negative impression of its critics, but the new rules say an ad is partisan only if it uses an elected member's picture, name or voice, the colour or logo associated with the political party, or directly criticize a party or member of the legislature.

Of the approximately \$50 million in government ads during the 2015-16 fiscal year, Lysyk said she would have flagged several under the old rules as misleading or self-congratulatory.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown wrote Friday to the president of the Treasury Board, the department that controls the government purse strings, about the ads.

"Your government has no authority to be spending hard-earned taxpayer dollars on partisan radio and social media ads to promote a plan that has not yet been tabled, debated, and voted on in the legislature," Brown wrote to Liz Sandals.

"I am concerned that these ads serve a partisan purpose that aim to improve the government's standing among the public using taxpayer dollars."

Brown called on Sandals to release the cost of the ad buy.

GLOBAL NEWS: ONTARIO PC LEADER CALLS FOR PUBLICLY-FUNDED 'PARTISAN' LIBERAL HYDRO ADS TO BE PULLED

By: Adam Miller

March 17, 2017

<http://globalnews.ca/news/3316951/ontario-liberals-release-radio-ads-to-promote-new-cuts-to-hydro-rates/>

The Ontario Liberals have released advertisements touting their 25 per cent average hydro rate cut across the province, while the opposition is calling for an immediate end to the campaign because it serves a “partisan purpose.”

“Ontario has made important investments in clean, reliable energy. This has led to hydro bills that have become harder to pay,” one of the ads states.

“We’ve heard you. Hydro needs to be fair for everyone across the province and we’ve made fundamental changes to ensure this in the long-term.”

Ontario Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said in November that changes to government advertising rules in 2015 has allowed the Liberals to “open the door” to billing taxpayers for millions of dollars in partisan advertisements.

Those changes removed the auditor’s discretionary powers to approve or reject ads, which Lysyk said reduced her office to a rubber stamp.

“Our Office approved the Hydro-related ads under the current version of the Government Advertising Act,” Lysyk said in a statement to Global News Friday.

“However, they would not have passed under the previous legislation because we feel that these ads have the objective of fostering a positive impression of the government.”

The old rules banned ads as partisan if the intent was to foster a positive impression of government or a negative impression of its critics. The new rules, however, say an ad is partisan only if it uses an elected member’s picture, name or voice, the colour or logo associated with the political party or direct criticism of a party or member of the legislature.

Ontario Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said in a statement Friday the government had a responsibility to “raise awareness” and pass along information to Ontario residents about programs and services that affect them.

“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,” he said.

“We have committed to both radio and social media campaigns to inform Ontarians on these important changes.”

Progressive Conservative Party Leader Patrick Brown sent a letter to Treasury Board President Liz Sandals Friday claiming the ads “promote the government’s proposed hydro scheme.”

“Your government has no authority to be spending hard-earned taxpayer dollars on partisan radio and social media ads to promote a plan that has not yet been tabled, debated, and voted on in the Legislature,” the letter stated.

Brown said he was concerned the ads served a “partisan purpose” to “improve the government’s standing” with the public by using taxpayer money.

“Moreover, these ads are potentially costing taxpayers millions of dollars while millions of families, as well as businesses, hospitals and other public institutions, suffer every day from unaffordable electricity bills,” he said.

“In the past, I would have asked [Lysyk] to investigate any questionable and partisan advertisements. Unfortunately your government has stripped the Auditor General’s ability to do so.”

Brown called for an immediate end to the advertising campaign, for the Liberals to publicly release the cost of the ads and to reveal the names of firms that hold “lucrative advertising contracts.”

The new ads aired on Toronto radio stations such as Q107 and 102.1 The Edge and promote the newly announced Fair Hydro Plan.

The plan will see electricity rates in the province slashed by an additional 17 per cent this summer, on top of Ontario’s eight per cent HST hydro rebate that took effect Jan. 1., and will hold with the rate of inflation for four years.

The Ontario Progressive Conservatives accused the Liberals of mismanaging the program because \$9.3 million was spent on consultants and \$2.4 million on media and advertising. The Liberals did not immediately respond for a request for comment on the advertisements.

The ads also come on the heels of a newly released Forum Research Poll for the Toronto Sun that suggests the PCs have a five percentage point lead over the Liberals at 36 to 31 per cent.

The poll stated the PCs climbed four per cent since February, taking a one per cent lead over the Liberals on Feb. 10, while the New Democratic Party and Green Party remain unchanged at 22 and seven per cent, respectively.

The poll used a random sample of 966 Toronto voters and was conducted from between March 8 and 10. The results are considered accurate plus or minus three per cent 19 times out of 20.

With files from Mark Carcasole and The Canadian Press

TBNEWSWATCH: HORWATH TOUTS NDP'S HYDRO PLAN

By: Leith Dunick

March 17, 2017

<https://www.tbnewswatch.com/local-news/horwath-touts-ndps-hydro-plan-563284>

SLATE RIVER, Ont. – Gerald Muller says most months his hydro bill amounts to having to make another mortgage payment.

The rural restaurant owner said he's looking to any and all provincial political parties to do something to cut his electricity costs, on Thursday sharing a recent \$1,088 power bill with Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, who made the trek to Northwestern Ontario to talk about her party's plan to keep hydro rates affordable.

Muller, who has owned A.J.'s Trading Post for the past 17 years, said it's just too expensive for business owners and residents alike to afford.

"It's actually equal to my \$200,000 mortgage every month," he said. "When you're paying that kind of power (bill), it takes away from your bottom line actually."

While he is looking for a financial break, what he's not looking for is passing the payment buck to future generations, something both opposition parties in Ontario have accused the Liberals of doing after Premier Kathleen Wynne last week announced an additional 17 per cent reduction in hydro rates starting this summer, on top of the removal of the provincial portion of the HST announced last year.

"When you look at our bills, we just got rid of a line on there called debt retirement. I don't want to see that line back for my children," Muller said. "There is no reason why we should have to kick it down the road. There have to be other things that can be done other than deferring payments and paying more in interest."

The NDP plan is nothing if not ambitious, promising to end time-of-use rates, which Horwath said unfairly targets business owners and creates confusion amongst ratepayers. She'd like a flat rate of about 10.3 cents per kilowatt hour, more in line with what's paid in neighbouring Manitoba and Quebec.

The plan also calls for a buy-back of privatized shares in Hydro One, sold by the Liberal government and an evening out of distribution rates, which are much higher for rural residents and businesses in Ontario. Horwath also promised to extricate the province from any unfair long-term power provision deals, which benefit out-of-province and out-of-country businesses over Ontario residents and entrepreneurs.

"It's not like hydro is a luxury," Horwath said during a sit-down conversation with Muller. "It's one of those things that should be fair."

While she praised the Liberals for finally answering the call and lowering rates, she was critical of how they'll achieve their goal.

“They’re not doing anything to change the system. The problem is with the hydro system, with the electricity system,” Horwath said. “They’re just kicking it down the field. It seems like every other day there is a new idea that nobody has heard about.”

The NDP leader called on Wynne to table a bill on Monday to allow debate on the plan to stretch hydro borrowing costs over an additional 10 years, lowering rates initially, but spreading costs out over 30 years instead of 20.

Horwath said her plan will bring an additional \$7 billion in dividends to the province, while she believes Wynne’s will cost taxpayers \$40 billion. The Conservatives have yet to provide a viable plan, she added.

TV TRANSCRIPTS (NOON)

GLOBAL: RADIO ADS OUT TODAY TO PROMOTE FAIR HYDRO PLAN

Source: Global

March 17, 2017, 12:09 PM (7)

Anchor: Just weeks after the Wynne government took steps to cut hydro rates here in Ontario, they're now making sure you know with a series of radio ads.

[Clip of the radio ad]: We have heard you and we're taking action with the Fair Hydro Plan.

Anchor: That's just part of an ad playing on radio stations across the province. The problem many are having with it, the ads were paid for by the Ontario government. Critics say the Liberals shouldn't be using taxpayer money to do that. The Liberals say they have a responsibility to make sure people are aware of the cuts.