

Evening Media Scan: Hydro Rate Reducation Plan - April 19, 2017

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Evening Media Scan: April 19, 2017

MEDIA SCAN: HYDRO RATE REDUCTION PLAN

April 19, 2017

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Online Coverage

Toronto Star: Kathleen Wynne insists she's not going anywhere despite concern among Liberal MPPs (Also appears in: Hamilton Spectator)
thestar.com
Wed Apr 19 2017
Section: News | Toronto Star
Byline: Robert Benzie

A defiant Premier Kathleen Wynne said she is not going anywhere despite concern within the governing Liberals that her unpopularity is hurting the party.

"I've made a decision, with the support of my caucus, to go into the next election," Wynne told reporters at the Children's Hospital of Eastern in Ottawa on Wednesday.

"We have important work still to do. We're on the verge of . . . bringing in a balanced budget for the first time in nearly a decade," she said, referring to Finance Minister Charles Sousa's April 27 budget.

"That will allow us to do more of the things that are needed in this province, whether it's in health care, whether it's in infrastructure."

Her comments came in the wake of a front-page Star story on Tuesday that revealed unease within the Liberals because Wynne badly trails both Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath in public-opinion polls.

The Star revealed that more than a dozen Liberal MPPs are considering not running again in the June 7, 2018 election over concern her numbers will drag them down.

"I understand that there is a political story around personal popularity, but that's actually beside the point for me," the premier said firmly.

"The point for me is to do the work that I was elected to do with the support of my colleagues," she said, flanked by a nodding Attorney General Yasir Naqvi, Community Safety and Correctional Services Minister Marie-France Lalonde, and MPP Nathalie Des Rosiers (Ottawa-Vanier).

"Of course, there are political calculations along the way. There always are. I've been in this office since 2013. We won a majority in 2014 and we have been doing the work that we were elected to do."

Asked why her personal popularity appears to be down - the economy is performing well and residential electricity rates are being cut by 25 per cent this year - Wynne smiled gamely.

"I'm going to leave that to the pundits and to the press . . . to analyze."

The Star disclosed that some Grits are worried about continuing organizational challenges in the Ontario

Liberal Party.

Within hours of those concerns being aired in print, the Liberals scrambled to announce a candidate for an upcoming byelection in Sault Ste. Marie, former local mayor Debbie Amaroso, and unveiled a new executive director of the party, former political staffer David Clarke.

One senior Liberal admitted the revelations in the Star were a "wake-up call" for a party that has been in power since October 2003.

To that end, the Grits are touting the skills of campaign co-chairs David Herle, who managed the victorious 2014 effort, Deputy Premier Deb Matthews, and prominent lawyer Tim Murphy, as well as campaign director Chad Walsh, a rising star in the party.

The Liberals also announced new campaign committees to oversee fundraising, candidate recruitment, the election platform, organization and communications.

Speaking in Toronto, Matthews said Wynne is "our best asset."

"She is making some really substantial change for our government . . . and her caucus is fully behind her and the party is fully behind her," she said.

"You know, we can get distracted by polls . . . so do not write Kathleen Wynne off. She's a very, very strong leader for us."

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North Bay Nipissing electricity costs continue to concern rural residents

Letter to the Editor
OPINION Apr 19, 2017 06:00

<https://www.northbaynipissing.com/opinion-story/7240199-electricity-costs-continue-to-concern-rural-residents-foca/>

Dear Premier Wynne,

The following comments are related to continued and widespread concerns about the unrelenting rise in electricity costs for rural residents.

We watched your introduction of Ontario's Fair Hydro Plan with great interest, and we look forward to hearing what the specific rate impacts will be for the various rate classes, and for the full range of utility customers.

You can appreciate that even a broad and significant cost shift may still leave some customers with troubling utility bills. With this in mind, we are seeking your leadership — especially with respect to low-use rural customers, who appear to still be on the hook.

In our letter dated Feb. 17, 2017, we outlined our concerns about the challenge of thousands of low-use customers in rural Ontario facing extreme electrical bill increases.

This looming burden remains aggravated by the discriminatory RRRP mechanism which provides a monthly \$60.50 bill credit to some R2 customers, while "seasonal" customers are faced with a monthly fixed delivery cost in excess of \$117 — up from the current \$36.28 — with no such bill credit available.

Based on what we can determine from the recent announcements, FOCA calculates that with a complete shift to "all-fixed" delivery charges, plus the elimination of the seasonal class, your proposed "25 per cent discount" would still yield an annual delivery charge of approximately \$1,053 for these 84,000 low-use customers (up from \$435.00). This still represents an increase of over 140 per cent on a major household expenditure, with little or no remedy or way to mitigate the cost, through conservation or otherwise.

Respectfully, your recent announcements related to "averages," not actual charges; Ontario's electrical customers are due some answers about their actual future bill impacts, along with what solutions or options will be available to help alleviate this tremendous shift. We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

Terry Kennedy

President, FOCA

Terry Rees

Executive Director, FOCA

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TVO Why is Kathleen Wynne so unpopular? It may not just be about

By: Steve Paikin

Published on Apr 19, 2017

<http://tvo.org/blog/current-affairs/why-is-kathleen-wynne-so-unpopular-it-may-not-just-be-about-policy>

Every now and then, I put a giant target on my back by pointing out things that will no doubt make readers want to kick me because they think I'm so far off-base.

This is one of those times. But please indulge me for a few minutes before kicking me.

Ever since Kathleen Wynne's approval numbers started plummeting, I have been casting my inquisitive net far and wide to determine why the premier is so unpopular.

It likely won't increase my own popularity to point out the following, but so be it. The pervasive narrative these days is that Wynne is simply no good — and anyone who says different invites scorn. Yet by so many criteria, Ontario is doing objectively better today than it was when Wynne assumed the premiership in February 2013.

Take, for example, Ontario's unemployment rate: today it's 6.2 per cent. When Wynne took office, it was 7.7 per cent.

On April 27, the provincial government will announce it's projecting a balanced budget for the 2017-18 fiscal year, fulfilling a commitment the Liberals made years ago when deficits were through the roof.

It's true that electricity prices — particularly in rural and northern Ontario — have been stubbornly beyond the reach of too many people for too many years. But Wynne has announced she'll cut rates an average of 25 per cent starting June 1, by extending the time required to pay back the billions borrowed to improve the system. Yes, that will mean higher rates for our children and grandchildren, but plenty of Liberal MPPs have told me hydro pricing is now practically a non-issue among their constituents.

Post-secondary education for lower-income households will now be "free" going forward, removing a barrier that kept too many young people from realizing their academic potential.

Pundits and elites (not so much "real folk") blasted the government for sanctioning a Wild West approach to political fundraising. Wynne intervened, passed one of the most restrictive fundraising laws in the entire country, and now ironically finds herself unable to fill her party's coffers due to the tougher conditions.

The housing market in the Greater Toronto Area is going gangbusters, which is a beautiful thing for those looking to sell and move somewhere cheaper (albeit not so beautiful for those who want to move to more-desirable locales and shorten their stress-inducing, spirit-draining commutes). And construction crews are all over the region, building billions of dollars' worth of public transit, after decades of underinvestment.

Marginalized groups have a new anti-racism secretariat to champion their issues; the government is moving to restrict the practice of "carding"; the Special Investigations Unit, which looks into police shootings, has been ordered to conduct its work more transparently.

The Liberals' cap-and-trade system, aimed at fighting climate change, is now in effect, and the first auction of carbon allowance permits sold out in no time flat.

I could go on, but you get the idea: this government obviously feels it has a good story to tell, and by

several criteria it does.

Of course, there is the other side of the story. A number of events have conspired to chip away at the government's cheery narrative. Plenty of people can't understand why the Liberals want to sink hundreds of millions of dollars into a one-stop Scarborough subway, beyond the craven political reasons.

Others don't fancy the idea of Wynne selling off 60 per cent of Hydro One, figuring we own it and are entitled to reap the dividend benefits of that ownership.

Wynne's progressive base was mortified when, after weeks of signalling that she wouldn't intervene in the city of Toronto's plan to raise money for infrastructure through road tolls, she rode in at the 11th hour and put a stop to it, again, for what appeared to be purely political reasons. (Her caucus — particularly the 905ers — practically demanded she intervene, saying they would lose their seats if she didn't.)

And there are smaller issues as well, ones that irritate the hell out of people: covering the cost of pizzas for teacher unions during contract negotiations; offering \$14,000 rebates to presumably wealthy Ontarians so they can more easily afford to buy Tesla electric cars; and having the health minister call a press conference to demonize Ontario doctors.

Moreover, while racialized groups may appreciate the anti-racism secretariat, some Ontarians feel they've been unfairly tarred as bigots for not supporting the venture with as much enthusiasm. The minister responsible for the initiative, Michael Coteau — himself a black Ontarian — appeared on The Agenda Tuesday to tell people that, yes, systemic racism is a real problem in this province.

Still, when you look at the pros and cons of Wynne's four years and 67 days in the premier's office, it's hard to understand how she's come to be Ontario's most unpopular premier of all time.

This is where I put the big target on my back again. Over the past six months in particular, I have heard a great deal of off-the-record chatter from Liberals who believe this province simply isn't as progressive as once believed. In June 2014, Ontarians gave Wynne a majority government despite her being two things that very few political leaders in this country have been: female and openly gay. And Wynne's sexuality rarely came up in the campaign.

But dig deeper, and you'll hear people confess that they didn't mind the premier when she was a touchy-feely, kumbaya sort of leader. Wynne still has that air, but she is more than that now. She's competitive as hell, sometimes to her detriment. She's made some hard decisions that might have been rewarded if they'd come from a male leader. But from a female leader in a culture sadly not free of sexism, such decisions are a tougher sell.

The fact is, even though she's been one of Ontario's most accomplished politicians of the last three decades (top cabinet jobs, party leadership, majority government), there is evidence that Wynne still has to deal with subtle forms of sexism. Can you imagine Stephen Harper, in a meeting with captains of industry, being repeatedly interrupted before he's finished talking? I can't. And yet I hear it happens to Wynne all the time.

Environment Minister Glen Murray is one of the few who will go on the record about this. "If Kathleen Wynne were a man, she wouldn't be facing any of this stuff," he tells me. "It's sexism, plain and simple."

Wynne has never presented herself as a particularly strong advocate for the gay community, and yet I hear whispers that people are becoming less comfortable with her sexual orientation and with the role Wynne's spouse, Jane Rounthwaite, plays in the premier's decision-making. I hear more and more "jokes" where the punch line goes something like, "If you want to know government policy on this issue, ask Jane."

Perhaps provincial affairs pundits overreached in their interpretation of Wynne's 2014 electoral victory. Perhaps the results were more a repudiation of Tim Hudak's conservative agenda than an endorsement of Wynne's progressive one.

None of this is meant to defend the indefensible. Some of Wynne's unpopularity is well earned, whether through bad policy choices, bad implementation, or bad communication. She leads a party that has been in power since 2003 and has accumulated plenty of barnacles on the ship of state in that time. Sometimes, as Stephen Harper found out in 2015, people just get tired of you, no matter how much you've accomplished.

But I do mean to put out there for discussion something that many people are addressing only in whispered tones, and almost never on the record. If Wynne were a heterosexual man rather than a gay woman, would her approval rating be so low?

Is it possible that part of the reason her poll numbers are down is that Ontario is a less progressive, more sexist, and more homophobic place than any of us would like to admit?

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Ottawa Citizen **Reevevely: Ontario scrambles to fix health, housing**
ottawacitizen.com
Wed Apr 19 2017
Section: Local News
Byline: David Reevely, Ottawa Citizen

Premier Kathleen Wynne has two messages before her government presents its budget next week: We're going to do something about hospitals and we're going to do something about the housing madness in Toronto.

Put another way, they're going to try to fix problems they helped create.

At the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario on Wednesday, on her second day of a two-day swing through Ottawa, Wynne repeated promises that health care will get a booster shot in next Thursday's budget.

In a chat in front of staff in their cafeteria - it was packed, with more people standing at the back than sitting - chief executive Alex Munter told Wynne that CHEO's mental-health unit was at 128-per-cent capacity last week, meaning a lot of patients the hospital didn't think could be sent home were being sent to other units. That's a ridiculously high number, a dangerous number. A number that compromises care.

The Citizen's Elizabeth Payne has documented just what that looks like(ottawacitizen.com») at other Ottawa hospitals, with patients routinely sleeping on stretchers in hallways, treated in storage rooms, stashed behind curtains. Hospital leaders worry openly about what happens if a bad highway crash, say, sends 30 people their way at once.

Doctor after nurse after doctor at CHEO talked about the need for more staff, more space, more technology to squeeze more efficient health care out of the staff and space they have.

"Looking forward, we're a little worried," said Tammy DeGiovanni, CHEO's director of ambulatory care, understatedly. We're out of ideas for doing more with less and the pressure keeps coming, she said.

"We have heard this. We have heard it loudly and clearly," Wynne said from her seat on a riser. "We know that we need to support you." Please, she said, be calm. Help is coming.

Help is needed in part because the government, struggling to slay a monster deficit, has squeezed hospital budgets year after year after year. Ontario's health budgets have grown, as any Liberal MPP will tell you, but hospitals' funding hasn't kept up with inflation. Their budgets have been frozen, or ticked up a percentage point or two when inflation has been greater.

The Ottawa Hospital cut 180 jobs in 2014 and 2015. CHEO cut 40 to 50, including nurses.

The deficit matters. Making our health system more efficient matters. But hospital overcrowding and waiting lists didn't just happen. They're consequences of choices the government made since Kathleen Wynne has been premier.

"It wasn't about intentionally squeezing hospitals," Wynne said. "It was about working to transform a health-care system that was in need of that and will continue to be in need of change as demographics change, as acuity changes, as the needs evolve."

Now the government will try to make sure hospitals have the resources they need, she said.

The provincial government doesn't own the housing market in the same way as it owns the health system, but that makes dealing with its acute crisis state on Toronto more difficult.

Governments don't know for sure how much a 33-per-cent annual increase in Toronto-area real-estate prices is a normal result of increased demand and how much is bubblineess frothed up by speculators that's going to soak everyone when it pops. They do know that Torontonians are screaming about rent hikes and bidding wars over dry spots under the Gardiner Expressway so they're going to do some things.

They're being coy about the things. But they include some form of renewed rent control, measures to reduce the profitability of flipping properties and restrictions on what real-estate agents do to provoke bidding wars.

But not, Bill Morneau and Charles Sousa and John Tory agreed after talking late Tuesday((news.ontario.ca»)), more things like the thing Wynne and Sousa did last fall, which was to refund a bigger share of the province's land-transfer tax when first-time buyers buy a home.

It was "an added boost" for young homebuyers, he said at the time. It was that. It was also a tax cut aimed directly at making some buyers able to pay even more for real estate than they could before. We're not talking about a lot of money in a million-dollar market, but whatever movement the tax rebate created was in the wrong direction.

"At that point, we were dealing with a situation where that was the really pressing issue, was first-time homebuyers," Wynne said. "The market was not as hot as it is now. But first-time homebuyers were still feeling a real challenge. If I'd had a crystal ball would we have done it all at once? Maybe. But I didn't have that crystal ball, and so we made a decision then."

These are a lot like the price of electricity. The government made choices, discovered those choices had bad consequences, and then took another run. When you're a politician you do deserve some credit for doing what you can to fix your mistakes, but you still made them.

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Barrie Examiner electrifying ideas on how to make progress

By: Erich Jacoby-Hawkins
Wednesday, April 19, 2017 7:22:40 EDT PM

<http://www.thebarrieexaminer.com/2017/04/19/electrifying-ideas-on-how-to-make-progress>

Green Party of Ontario leader Mike Schreiner recently toured the region to meet local citizens at two events where the main topic of discussion was Ontario's electricity system and the bills we pay for it.

There was much bad news, some potential good news, but most of all the need for a mature, non-partisan conversation about how to provide Ontario with the energy we need for our homes, services and industries.

Unfortunately, that conversation seems elusive. So far, the major parties obsess over finding scapegoats (mostly each other), or conjuring up their own Game of Shells to move costs around between private or public ownership, delivery charges or power rates versus tax hikes or borrowing, etc.

Until we sit down and accept that this is a complex problem with several contributing causes requiring multi-faceted solutions, and avoid over-selling the non-solutions, we won't make progress. One popular scapegoat, for example, is renewable energy. Many people, usually on the right of the political spectrum, assert that wind and solar are the cause of our high power bills. Yet the numbers show otherwise.

According to Ontario Energy Board reports, renewable energy is responsible for only 17% of the Global Adjustment (GA) which comprises so much of our high bills. Larger shares are due to gas generation (26%) and most of all nuclear, which alone accounts for 42% of the GA. And with that aside, about half of the rate increases over the past decade are due to inflation or necessary work to keep the distribution grid reliable. But if nuclear is to blame for our history of high prices, what about the future? How can we invest in energy production that's getting cheaper, and avoid methods that will cost more?

Here, again, the truth is contradicts the common wisdom. The price of solar and wind have dropped rapidly over the past decade: the most recent round of bidding in Ontario provided wind at an average cost of only nine cents per kWh, with solar costs also trending downward.

We are also buying hydro from Quebec as cheap as four cents per kWh.

Meanwhile, Ontario Power Generation has applied to triple their rate for nuclear power over the coming decade, up to almost 17 cents/kWh.

So logically, we should be ramping down how much nuclear we use, and replacing it (where needed) with wind, solar, and hydro. Not only does this green our energy mix, it lowers our bills. Yet, the province cancelled the last round of renewable bids and is still planning to refurbish our aging nuclear fleet to run past its expiry date.

It's true that Ontario paid above-market rates for renewable energy earlier in the decade, to jump-start this promising new industry. But now that rates have come down, it makes no sense to step away. We can make up for earlier buy-high costs by buying low, now that the industry has matured.

The Liberal Game of Shells, by creating a \$25 billion Band-Aid on rates, helps subsidize waste by the rich (who consume more energy) at the ultimate expense of the poor. On top of that, it undermines the business case for net metering, due to replace the microFIT program next year.

What we really need is a massive push for conservation and efficiency to reduce how much power we consume and what we pay for it. Privatizing parts of the system will bring the opposite: private owners maximizing their return by increasing consumption. Only a publicly owned utility can effectively carry out a mandate to help lower your use and your bills.

So it all comes down to this: let's have a mature conversation about how to maximize our savings through efficiency, through sourcing cheap AND clean electricity, and put aside the myths and partisan attacks. And if you don't have solar panels now, don't miss your last opportunity to take part in the microFIT program and produce clean energy to sell into the grid.

Erich Jacoby-Hawkins serves on the boards of Living Green and the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation.

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Blackburn newsdoners Express Disappointment Over Soaring

By: Miranda Chant
April 18, 2017 11:13PM

<http://blackburnnews.com/london/london-news/2017/04/18/londoners-upset-soaring-hydro-rates/>

While the past winter was a mild one, it wasn't nearly mild enough for Londoner Steve Everett who, due to soaring hydro rates, couldn't afford to turn the heat on in his apartment.

At the insistence of his wife, Everett, 69, shared his story at a town hall meeting hosted by London West New Democrat MPP Peggy Sattler at Oakridge Secondary School on Tuesday night.

"One of the things we go without is heat," said Everett. "We have a little \$25 Canadian Tire ceramic heater that sits and keeps us warm while we cuddle up with blankets. We dress in layers for life in our apartment."

Everett said he and his wife moved to a new apartment that had better living conditions but where electricity isn't included in their \$800 monthly rent. In an effort to keep the cost of their hydro bill down, Everett said he and his wife took steps to scale back their energy consumption. The pair only did laundry during off-peak hours and lived in the dark, only flipping on a light when absolutely necessary. When that didn't lower their bill enough, they shut off their electric heat.

"Even though we cut back so extreme, we're still paying \$200 a month and for seniors on a fixed income that's a lot of money," said Everett.

Sattler said that she is hearing these same concerns from families and businesses across her riding.

"Energy poverty is a term that has now become very common when we have discussions about these issues," said Sattler. "We know that for seniors who are on fixed incomes, for people who are on disability or are low income trying to deal with the escalating hydro rates is almost impossible. It's putting them over the edge in their ability to be able to afford groceries. It's becoming heat or eat. That's the choice we keep hearing about."

A 13-page plan unveiled by Ontario's New Democrats in February, promises hydro ratepayers up to a 30% reduction on their energy bills and would see the end of mandatory time-of-use billing.

"There are some real structural changes that have to be made if we are going to get our energy costs under control," said Sattler. "That's something we have not seen with the Liberals. The Liberals just want to push it off for 30 years at a cost of \$40-billion and just leave it for the next generation."

The NDP energy blueprint also includes plans to buy back the 30% of Hydro One shares the Liberal government has sold.

The privatization of Hydro One was brought up by several of the people who attended Sattler's town hall meeting. Many of those people, left the meeting carrying lawn signs reading "Keep Hydro Public."

In March, the Liberal government launched the Fair Hydro Plan, which they said would cut hydro bills by 25%. That figure included any savings from the previously announced removal of the provincial portion of the HST from bills. They also extended the financing period of infrastructure investments to ensure more equitably distributed over time.

The Liberals have claimed electricity prices have risen for two reasons: billions of dollars in overdue investment in hydro infrastructure and the move away from the use of coal to produce electricity in favour of green energy.

Sattler intends to share the feedback she received during the two hour town hall meeting with her fellow MPPs in the Ontario Legislature.

TV Transcripts

N o n e