

MEDIA EVENT: MINISTERS' PRE-CAUCUS SCRUMS

From: "Lepage, Guy (CAB)" <guy.lepage@ontario.ca>
To: "@CAB-QPscrums" <cab-qpscrums@msgov.gov.on.ca>
Cc: "@CAB-Issues" <cab-issues@msgov.gov.on.ca>
Date: Tue, 21 Nov 2017 14:42:54 -0500
Attachments: Nov. 21 - Ministers' Pre-Caucus Scrums.doc (121.86 kB)

MEDIA EVENT: MINISTERS' PRE-CAUCUS SCRUMS

Nov. 21, 2017

Location:

Outside Legislature

Speakers:

Ministers Matthews; Hunter; Naidoo-Harris; Thibault; Hoskins; PC MPP Smith; NDP MPPs Sattler; Tabuns

Media Attendance:

Print – 10

TV – 7

Radio – 2

Media Outlets:

Jones – CP; Jeffords – CP; Ferguson – Star; Rushowy – Star; Giovanetti – Globe; Smith Cross – QP Briefing; Hains – QP Briefing; Reynolds – QP Briefing; Smith – QP Today; Crawley - CBC Radio/TV; Brule - Radio Canada/CJBC; Fitzpatrick – CBC Online; Global; Delaney - CTV Ontario; Rath - CHCH Television; City TV; Wu – Fairchild TV; Morissette – TFO; CP24

Media Questions:

Questions for Minister Matthews:

Q: Rath: The colleges are telling some of the students that if they take the option to not complete the semester, to just walk away from the semester, that they may not be admitted. That admittance is not a guarantee. Should students that walk away from the semester be given priority in admittance?

So I think this is an issue that colleges are wrestling with right now. If they're withdrawing then they do have to reapply. I think we have to take a look at this one.

Q: Rath: So you'll get back to us? Shouldn't the province mandate that? Isn't that something that you should tell colleges?

So it's an issue that I'm hearing about and one that I'm looking at.

Q: Jeffords: Is there any workaround that a student could use right now to make this decision? I mean there is a timeline right?

So yeah. So we really wanted to give students the opportunity to get a really good sense of what that re-entry looks like and what the path to completion looks like. And that's why we're giving them two weeks to get a sense of whether they can complete, what supports are going to be there for them. You know any student who started in September is going to want to complete if they can. But for those who for whatever reasons do not feel they can, then we're offering a full refund, a tuition refund for those students.

Rath: It's gotta be pretty tough for those students to just pick up again, wouldn't it? I mean, they'd pretty much be forgotten what they learned.

No, no. You know a lot of students have been working through the strike, doing the readings and so on. And the colleges are really committed to support students back into completing this semester. Everybody, faculty, everybody wants students to complete. And then I think we'll see that the vast majority do.

Q: Smith: In your role as Deputy Premier, do you have many more of those town halls the Premier will be doing?

What I can tell you, she really enjoyed it last night. She really likes connecting with real people, not that media are not real people, and not that opposition are not real people. But she really enjoyed the experience. She likes doing it. And we'll see if there will be more.

Q: Smith: Do you have any reaction to concerns that there might be like a partisan problems with her doing this?

This is the Premier talking to members of the public. I think that's exactly what the Premier should be doing.

Q: Fitzpatrick: Are you going to be keeping your eye on the PC convention this weekend?

Yes I will. I will be very interested to see whether they emerge from that with good strong policy ideas. I think that Patrick Brown, the PCs for way too long have been good at criticizing. They're very, very weak on their own plans. So yes. This is what, the weekend we've all been waiting for.

Q: Fitzpatrick: Will you be expecting some solid ideas out of it? And if you hear some are you willing to work with them on that?

We'll see what they come out with. So far if the past is any prediction of the future, then I think they'll be pretty washed out, motherhood statements. So we'll see. But if you remember when we brought in our Fair Hydro Plan they said we'll get back to you in another two days about what our plan is. I think it's hundreds of days later now. They still have not got a plan.

Q: Fitzpatrick: So you haven't heard them take positions on enough of the things you guys have.....

The only thing they taken a position on is that they're role back the increase in minimum wage. So as far as I'm aware the only position they've taken

Q: Smith: Will you guys release the costs of the town halls? We know that Trudeau did a bunch and it was about a hundred and thirty one thousand last spring.

So I don't know the answer to that. We'll see if we can get back to you.

Q: Reynolds: The College Employer's Council, there's been some criticism for perhaps being an ineffective tool for representing colleges that range from 100,000 students to one very small in size. I'm wondering if there will be a look at re-examining that structure?

I've said before that the system failed the students, and we are going to take a very close look at what we could do better, what changes could be made to make sure that this doesn't happen again.

Q: Reynolds: It's sort of like a college by college bargaining model, is it feasible?

I'm not going to get into what might be solutions. But what I can tell you there is a problem., and the problem is it took way too long to get students back. Thank you.

Questions for Minister Hunter :

Q: Crawley: Because what you're seeing is because of the lack of teachers. They don't enough qualified French Immersion teachers. What is the ministry doing in relation to making there is enough trained French-immersion teachers? We hear this is a problem-the lack of French-immersion teachers, is a problem quite widespread, and here is an example of where it is actually having an impact on programs.

Well, we know that students who have a second language, this is an advantage for students and they're very interested in in doing so in acquiring that second language. We want to make that available through the French immersion programs that are delivered through the school boards. We are very aware that the demand for French as second language teachers certainly outstrips the supply. That's why we're importing a number of things within the ministry to address this issue. The first area is working together with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development to provide access to those spaces within post-secondary for mature students. We are also making funds available for existing teachers who want to upgrade their qualifications for in-demand programs like French, which is a priority. We're actually also doing creative things, like extending and working together with the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration for people with teacher qualifications that have come to Ontario and to Canada to have a way into the teaching profession that makes sense for them, providing additional training for cultural competency within

the education field within the province of Ontario's contexts. We have a number of different measures that we're doing. We know that there is a high demand for friendship and teachers, including for French as a second language. We're also taking steps to better track and monitor the supply and demand needs for French teachers. And that's something that we will do moving forward. We've put together a working group that can assist to advise the ministry as we move forward.

We are taking steps and we highly encourage boards like Halton that perhaps are considering ending programs, to really think about these measures that we're putting in place and how it could impact the supply of teachers moving forward.

Q: Crawley: So is there anything that can be done in the immediate-term so that this board doesn't have to make this decision of getting rid of early immersion?

My ministry and my team have been in touch directly with the board. And I know that this is a conversation that they will be having, along with a conversation with their students and with parents and with their community. That consultation is important for any decision that a board makes. This is such an important decision. We know that having a second language is important to students

Q: Morissette: I missed the beginning. What do you think of that vote, is it something you probably don't want to see. What do you see what we should do?

You know I would encourage the Halton board to really think about the immediate measures that we're putting in place to address the shortage of French teachers. We know that having a second language is advantageous to students. They're interested in taking French. We want boards to make that available to students as much as possible.

Questions for Minister Naidoo-Harris:

(Joined in progress) lays out some very clear rules, and they were in contravention of those rules. We're monitoring the situation, but we're working very closely with them because we want to help them come into compliance. The bottom line is we want to make sure that those supports and services are there for our children and families.

Q. Crawley: How were they contravening the rules?

So those rules were brought into place two years ago, were first introduced on the advice of the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman made it clear to us that there were some situations going on that really needed some extra rules being brought in, and so we did them. Bottom line is this: the safety of our children is a number-one priority when it comes to early years and child care, and we need to work hard and closely with all of our partners to ensure that happens. You know, if you were operating a child care, there are rules. If you are operating authorized rec, there are rules. And if you are doing something that is in between, then you have to abide by the rules. They were operating for more than five days a week, and (inaudible) essentially operating in a space that should be child care. So we just are saying to them, 'we're giving you some options. We're going to work with you. We want to help these families, and we are here to make sure that we are delivering before- and after-school care and early-years child-care supports as much as we can.'

Q. Crawley: So the parents that we've spoken to that have their kids in these programs (inaudible) be really unhappy with the ministry cracking down (inaudible). What do you say to those parents?

I say to them that we understand the challenges and difficulties that this may be creating for families, but, you know, the bottom line is this is about our children. This is about keeping them safe, and this is about creating an environment where they can really reach their full potential. We are going to work with Strauss Kids (sp?) to bring them into compliance. We'll work hand-in-hand with them to help them. We're creating – we're letting them know what their options are, and absolutely, we want to make sure that support is there. I'd like to add that as you may be aware, we also brought in before- and after-school care in schools where there is sufficient demand. And we introduced that legislation. We brought that in in September, and at this point, I believe 83 per cent – maybe, that number may be even higher – of the schools in Ontario are offering before- and after-school care. So we are doing everything we can to create more options for parents, build those supports, but safety is key, and making sure that people pay attention to the rules is key. Those rules were introduced two years ago and child-care agencies and child-care providers were given two years to become aware of the rules and to make sure they were complying. And in this instance, we know they're providing a valuable service and we're going to help them with the options and try to help them become compliant.

Q. Crawley: Are there other similar programs that your ministry is also (inaudible) that the ministry see are violating?

So we have an enforcement team. We work, you know, very closely to ensure that people are paying attention to the rules. If you're asking me, 'are there people in the province who aren't paying attention to the rules or – and are not in compliance?' You know, our (inaudible) are out there doing the investigation. You know, it's something that is ongoing and we're always monitoring.

Q. Curran: What can parents do to say (inaudible) shortage of child care, what can parents do? I mean, some are saying they might have to quit their jobs because (inaudible)

Well (inaudible) was actually in compliance, you know, earlier, so we're going to work with them to get there. We're (inaudible) work with them as quickly as possible and absolutely we want to make this as simple and as painless for parents and, you know, frankly, as I said before, this is about safety and creating a safe space for our children, and even though they're providing a valuable service, we are not going to put them in an environment that is not safe. There are rules. Those rules are there to protect our children and I'm proud of those rules and we will stand behind those rules because it is about making sure that our children are in the right environment. Thank you.

Questions for Minister Thibault:

Q: Brule: There are arguments the report published today by the FAO did not include all the fact in terms of example, the cost of electricity produced by nuclear energy. That it moderates it by 180% but that was not in the report. What do you say to that?

The Financial Accountability Office does a very thorough job of looking at all of the costs and bringing forward a report and this report was very thorough and you know talks about the importance of nuclear energy to the province and that it is our most cost effective and green and clean reliable source of energy that we can have.

Q: Brule: The first bit of Darlington is over budget. How can assure Ontarians that the whole refurbishment, \$25B is not going to be over budget?

So you're talking about the heavy water station which is one subproject of 500 you know subprojects. So the overall Darlington project is actually on time and on budget and following its working plan. And with the heavy water component that was one piece that they looked at and that just shows the oversight that we have now. They saw that there were problems that were happening so they dealt with it and the project will continue to move forward on time and on budget.

Q: Jeffords: There is a section in that report that highlights the history of refurbishments and their history of overruns. And there significant overruns. So what can you do at this point to, I guess, avoid that?

So there have been many many things that have been done to ensure that overruns and you know over budget actually doesn't happen and so we have an oversight and external body that is actually on OPG site to make sure that even before we get to the off ramps, because we do have the off ramps, which is another piece that we can look at. But even before we get to the off ramps there's no surprises for the government that we know where they're at. And that's why we know right now that Darlington Unit 2 is on time and on budget. We also have the mock-up, which is a phenomenal piece, if you haven't had a chance to actually go in and see that I would encourage you to try and find ways that you can do that. It's a mock-up in which they practice every single procedure to make sure that when they get in there that there's no surprises. And that again is showing that you know we're able to keep things on track and on budget.

Q: Haines: Speaking of those off-ramps one thing that was mentioned in that report is that you need very significant cost overruns to justify using those off ramps and that you know turning a big project around like this is very difficult. Are you concerned about using those off-ramps?

So as I mentioned we have an external third party individual that is there working with OPG, can see the daily data if he so chooses, to make sure that there's no surprises. And so you know we would before we would ever have to get to an off-ramp, we would know well ahead if there were some serious issues and then start dealing with those appropriately. So you know there are mechanisms in place to ensure that we protect rate payers, we ensure that everything stays on time and on budget. But there are the off ramps there if we need to use them.

Q: Haines: So often an FAO report is critical of government. This one appears to at least in some aspects

of it, approves of the plan the government is pursuing when it comes to nuclear refurbishment. What do you make of that?

We put a lot of time and efforts as a government to making sure that you know we did this right. And you know what? I appreciate the office of the FAO making sure that they review it. And and like all independent officers while we may not always you know see the eye to eye on everything, they always bring forward positive recommendations and we do what we can to make sure that we implement those and you know this report is just that, talking about what we've been saying all along, is that our nuclear fleet is of course our cheapest form of electricity and it's also the cleanest form electricity for us here in the province right now.

Q: Smith: The FAO said they did the report because it was requested by an anonymous MPP. Since it was something that works well for you guys any chance it was Liberal? Do you know?

Well I was an anonymous MPP so...

Q: Smith: It was anonymous so we don't get to know.

I don't know who submitted that request.

Q: Smith: Was it you?

It wasn't me. I can tell you it wasn't this MPP.

Q: Smith: It narrows it down.

Ok, now you got another 106....

Questions for Minister Hoskins:

Q: Delaney: Minister we're doing a story on a man, he is 57 years old, he has MS, he's bed stricken, he gets infections, he's at a long term care facility, he's 300 meters from Etobicoke General Hospital. The hospital used to provide an ambulance to get him back when he's being treated for these infections, now they've stopped doing that – is that right for this family?

Well, first I don't know, apart from what you've told me, I don't know the particulars of this individual's situation. But, as I mentioned before, we encourage hospitals to work closely with all our health care facilities including our long term care homes -- whether it's for urgent or not urgent transport. Certainly I would encourage this incident – in this incident as well, so hospitals, individuals, fire, ambulance transport to and from hospitals, are generally required to pay copayment many, many cases, and certainly the hospital will have its discretion in many cases they do waive that copayment fee. But again, that understanding of particular circumstances I can't comment on this case.

Q: Delaney: So in this case the wife had to go pick him up in a wheelchair, was wheeling him out of the hospital, wheeling him down the road to the long care facility. In your mind, the optics of that can't be good?

Well again I'd rather not comment on a specific case not knowing the details of that. But hospitals across the province regularly work with their partners across the healthcare system, including in the long-term care homes, to ensure that patients who call long-term care homes their homes, or residents of those homes, have the necessary transport available to them.

Q: Delaney: Would you say hospitals these days are being a bit too firm with changing the rules and, in this case, changing the rules for this family they're looking to cut too many costs there?

Well, you know, I've found the opposite that hospitals are very flexible, so, and there are categories of persons, for example, that that copayment they'll waive for Ontario Works or ODSP, for example, or if the hospital determines they don't have the financial wherewithal. But I've found that Hospitals have been very active and flexible with their partners in the health system and with patients and clients to ensure that necessary transport is provided at a reasonable cost.

Q: Casey: Minister how concerned are you about the large amount of opioids that are going missing from hospitals?

So I'm not aware of that, of what you're reporting. So of course across the health care system, in the -- when we're faced with a public health crisis with regards to opioids we're taking every necessary measure to ensure that at every touch points -- proper prescribing, at the level of the pharmacy, education to the recipients of legal opioids, quick response for supports, whether that's detoxification or whether it's other community supports and treatment, all the way to the front line workers, harm reduction workers, who are working to ensure and save lives of those who use drugs, use opioids. So we have a comprehensive program across that and certainly we expect the hospitals to do everything within their ability to ensure the security of their supplies.

Q: Casey: Yeah, so, through some freedom of information we were able to get some reports that suggest, you know, opioids are going missing and a lot of [inaudible] for unknown reasons, it's like they vanished --

Again not understanding the specifics of this, but I will have my staff look into it and I'll ask the ministry about these reports.

Q: Casey: Would your ministry be willing to fund retrofits so that -- the pharmaceutical component of the hospital would be automated like in Humber River Hospital?

Well you know I'm confident that in the vast majority of our hospitals that they have highly secure environments for controlled drugs and substances. There are certain hospitals, particularly our newer ones, that have the automated system that provides an added layer of certainty in terms of the prescribing process. But again, I'm confident of the hard work that our hospitals do, there can be a variety of reasons for what you describe, but I'm certainly going to ask my ministry for more information.

Questions for PC MPP Smith:

Q. Jeffords: [Joined in progress] for these units. I saw the Tory statement saying you support it. What do you make of that report and its look that or its view that overruns, I guess, are real risk or a significant risk?

I mean, overruns are a significant risk. There's no question about that. But I feel very confident in the current management team at OPG and at Bruce that have learned from mistakes that have been made in the sector in the past that have resulted in cost overruns. The contingency plans that they've built in at OPG and Bruce are amazing to see. They've planned for every possible outcome that could occur, including building a mock reactor in Darlington to practice on, right, so the skilled trades folks don't make mistakes when they get inside the reactor and the refurbishment starts. So, you know, I'm really confident that the management team that is there has learned from the mistakes that have been made in the past and have built in the contingency plan any kind of situations that might arise that could cause the project to go over budget. But having said that, you know, that financial accountability officer made it very, very clear that this is the best bang for Ontario's buck when it comes to providing carbon free, reliable base load power for the province of Ontario. And we're glad to see that he came up with that result in his report, as well, because that's what we believed for a long time.

Q. Jeffords: So some...some critics of the report said that it doesn't consult widely enough that it's just focused on the sector itself. What do you make of that?

I mean, I can't speak to how the FAO conducted its investigation or carried out its report in this. You know, I know from folks that I've talked to in the energy sector, and the nuclear sector, they feel very confident about the reliability of nuclear going forward; the low cost because it is providing 65 per cent of our base load every day in the province. And it is emissions free. You know, all of those things in his report are good. I can't speak to who he spoke to or how they carried out their investigation into this, but I like the result. I like the result that we can rely on nuclear power going forward in Ontario. And we've been strong supporters of that, instead of, you know, the mistakes that have been made by the Liberals on the energy file over the last number of years in investing in power generators that are intermittent, that aren't there when we need them, that we can't rely on. We know that the nuclear facilities are going to be there providing base load power at a very reasonable rate for Ontario ratepayers and for years to come.

Q. Smith: Did you have a chance to watch the Premier's town hall last night?

I did not, no. I was watching a Leafs game. And I was very disappointed with that call at the end, by the way.

Q. Smith: I was watching the Premier's thing. Do you have any, like, concerns that these town halls might be too partisan? Should it be paid for by taxpayer money?

Yeah, well, from what I understand the town hall last night was a Government of Ontario town hall meeting. I have town hall meetings in my riding all the time. It's how, as an MPP, you get your pulse and what the community is thinking on a number of different issues. Particularly, for me, over the last number of years, I've held town halls. You know, there's a, there's a small cost that goes along with renting a hall, I suppose, and advertising that. But, you know, I think all of us as politicians should be finding out the pulse of all of our local community, what people are saying, and what the issues are. From what I understand, the Premier heard loud and clear last night that people aren't real satisfied with the way that she's been running the province.

Q. Brule: About that report by the FAO, what do you make of it? (Inaudible)

Yeah, as I said, we're quite pleased with the report, as supporters of the nuclear industry and the fact that it is providing affordable base load, reliable power, you know. It's there when the people of Ontario need it. You know it's going to be there, unlike the costly wind turbine projects and solar panels that are intermittent power suppliers. You know, the nuclear plants are going to be there when we need the power. And as the FAO reported today, it seems as if those projects are on time and on budget. And I know that the management that currently is at Bruce and at OPG have been well-prepared. They've learned from mistakes that have been made in the past. And they understand how important the nuclear refurb projects are to not just the ratepayers or electricity customers in Ontario, but to the nuclear industry as a whole. And I think they've done the preparation work that needed to be done to make sure that these projects stay on time and on budget. It's to the benefit of everybody involved.

Q. Brule: Do we have safeguards to make sure that it actually stays on budget?

Yeah, I think so. And I've met with the OPG numerous times and Bruce power, and have looked at their contingency plans that they have in place. They've accounted for every possible scenario. As I say, they've learned from their mistakes. They've even built a mock reactor in Darlington, so they can practice with their skilled trades, so that they know exactly what they're getting into. Time is money on these refurbishments. And, you know, if the skilled trades that are in there working on the refurbishment can't do the work, for one reason or another, because something wasn't the size they thought it was going to be, well, that costs potentially millions, billions of dollars. They've invested in this nuclear mock station. And I think it's going to pay dividends in the end. And the FAO feels so, you know, feels the same way.

Questions for NDP MPP Sattler:

Q: Jeffords: Students and their enrolment status. I understand that you would have to re-apply to get back in if you drop out to get the tuition refund. Is your understanding?

That is what it sounds like the government is saying. Basically this government is offering students a false choice. They're saying you can withdraw from college or you can withdraw from the semester, but if you do, you will have to reapply and you have no guarantee that you will get back into your program in January. This is unacceptable for students who are really, really worried about their ability to manage a compressed semester. Many students are parents and they're trying to juggle a family and going to school. They may have a disability- it's a challenge to try to deal with the coursework. So to have to accommodate a compressed semester over the holidays and not be able to withdraw and start fresh in January is just unfair to students who have already been punished enough because of five weeks of Liberal inaction.

Q; Crawley: So isn't it only fair that they may not be able to get selected again? What about all of the students that are wanting to apply for college in the next term or the next entry? If they have to go up against a bunch of other students and you end up with this sort of glut of students applying for spaces. You see what I mean? Isn't it fairest that if a student makes a decision to withdraw, that they have to reapply just like all of the other new students who are wanting to get those coveted spots?

Yes. And certainly withdrawing from college is one thing. But to re-do this semester, to have a fresh start in January, is something different. These students have already been accepted into their program. They paid tuition for a semester that they never got. Now they're being asked to compress five weeks of learning into two. Many students are going to be struggling to remember what was taught in those first four weeks, five weeks ago. And so Students I think have a legitimate case to make that they are not getting the full value of what they paid for this September. They should have the option of going in January and getting a fresh start and doing it all over again.

Questions for NDP MPP Tabuns:

Q: Jeffords: [Joined in progress] ...done enough to look at his business case, as opposed to just the risks?

Well, first of all, I want to thank the FAO. They do very good work in this province. I think they could have expanded it somewhat, but I have to say to you, I'm very worried about a government that doesn't think through the risk. I don't have confidence that they'll actually understand what has to be taken into account and act in a way that will protect ratepayers in Ontario. And I think that's the larger story.

Q: Jeffords: So the report highlights the history of cost overruns of these refurbishments. It basically says that there is a significant risk of that. You know, is it your view that that could be down the road for these particular projects?

Well, if you look at history in Ontario, we've seen cost overruns on reactors go 300 per cent over, we've seen them double. That's the history we've had in this province and it's had a big impact on the cost of hydro. This is a government that hasn't done the business analysis that you need to actually understand what the risks are that we are taking on and that's a (inaudible) concern.

Q: Reynolds: Sorry if I missed this earlier, but were you pleased to see the Premier making herself open and accessible to the public at last night's town hall?

I think all politicians should make themselves accessible.

Q: Reynolds: Did you have any thoughts on some of the harsh questions that came her way?

Well, don't be surprised that the Premier is going to get harsh questions. When I go door-to-door in my riding, I meet a lot of people who are very upset with the performance of this government. They're disappointed. This is not the premier they thought they were voting for in the last election; the person who has privatized Hydro One, who has been starving the health care and education systems. This isn't the government that they thought they were going to get. So if people are upset now when she has meetings with them, nobody should be surprised.

N.B.: Comments captured are not verbatim quotes

Prepared by:

Guy Lepage, Senior Issues Analyst
Jonathan Colford, Senior Issues Analyst
Ann Doose, Senior Issues Analyst
Rob Di Giovanni, Coordinator, Media Monitoring
Cindy Basha, Issues Assistant
Rachel Jonsson, Research and Administrative Coordinator