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QP BRIEFING

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Articles

1). Party leaders attempt to woo Northern Ontario

By: Sabrina Nanji

With a little more than a year to go before the next election, all three party leaders are vying to be crowned the best policymaker for Northern Ontario this week.

At the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities conference (FONOM) in North Bay, the opposition party leaders accused the governing Liberals of letting Ontario’s northern and rural communities simmer on the back-burner, while the premier maintained that’s “just not true.”

Speaking to an estimated crowd of more than 250 mayors, councillors and municipal staff from Northeastern Ontario, each leader propped up their party as the one best suited to addressing Northern Ontario’s needs.

The common thread between NDP Leader Andrea Horwath and Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown is that the Liberals have allowed the region to fall by the wayside, citing rural school closures, hospital funding and the cost of hydro.

“It’s like Northern Ontario has been almost entirely forgotten,” Horwath said Thursday morning. She also pointed out, as her caucus has done in Question Period, that there is no mention of

the mineral-rich Ring of Fire region “and its potential for the northern economy” in Budget 2017.

“The Premier’s budget does nothing to fix the damage she’s done,” Horwath said.

Her speech echoed much of the one delivered at her party’s annual convention last month, when she unveiled the NDP’s version of pharmacare, which would provide coverage for 125 commonly prescribed medications for all Ontarians.

Brown – who has previously called for a “northern lens” on government budgets – said the lack of Ring of Fire references in Budget 2017 shows the Liberals have “completely abandoned” the region and “disregard” the north.

He said it’s clear the Liberals “aren’t serious” about developing the Ring of Fire, which he estimates is a resource worth $60 billion.

“[The Liberals] continue to take Northern Ontario for granted. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Liberals’ recent budget. It was an attack on Northern Ontario,” he said at FONOM Wednesday.

Brown also accused the Liberals of slashing $70 million from the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines budget this year, and spending “not a penny” of the $1-billion for infrastructure that was promised in 2014.

He rounded out his speech with a pledge similar to the one made in Toronto, that northern municipalities will have a “partner” at Queen’s Park if he becomes premier next spring.

Meanwhile, Premier Kathleen Wynne said the opposition’s claims are “just not true.”

Wynne said base funding for the Ministry of Northern Development had actually increased by $30 million this year. She explained there was a one-time, $100-million mining site rehabilitation program put in place last year, which accounts for the change in this year’s budget.

The $1 billion earmarked for building infrastructure in the Ring of Fire is still available, she added. Wynne said she wants ample time to discuss development with groups that will be most impacted, such as First Nations communities.

“There is nobody in the province that wants a shovel in the ground more than I do,” Wynne said at FONOM's fireside chat Thursday, after trumpeting the Liberals version of pharmacare, which covers 4,400 prescriptions for those under 24, at a children's treatment centre that morning.

“There are lots of voices that say ... the government doesn’t care about Northern Ontario. I just want you to know that is just not true. I think about Northern Ontario every time we have a policy discussion at our cabinet table," she said.

[Top](#)

2). Liberals chide PCs for ‘quietly’ killing ‘anti-worker bill’

By: Sabrina Nanji

For the second time this week the Liberals have criticized Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown for smothering a bill that had initially sparked an uproar for being on the order paper in the first place.

PC MPP Jim McDonell killed his brainchild Bill 83, a private member’s bill that proposed to change the way Ontario workers join a union, via a motion Wednesday afternoon. McDonell successfully moved to discharge and withdraw the bill, introduced in December, from the order paper, “after careful consideration and advice from colleagues.”

But the Liberals charged Thursday the PCs "quietly" yanked the “anti-worker bill” after facing criticism from the government benches, and with the Sault Ste. Marie byelection looming large on June 1. The Grits have spent the week decrying the PC's earlier call to beef up foreign-takeover protections for unions as "hypocritical," particularly because of Bill 83.

"Under [Brown's] watch, the PCs introduced Bill 83 ... which would make it more difficult for hard-working Ontarians to exercise their rights under the Labour Relations Act," said a release from the Liberal Caucus Service Bureau. "Brown needs to explain why he continues to shape-shift like a chameleon, and hide his true anti-worker beliefs that both he and his party hold dear."

Under the now-dead legislation, the Ontario Labour Relations Board would require a certain threshold of employees vote in favour of the union, including in the construction industry, which currently only requires at least 55 per cent of employees sign-up with union membership cards, not a vote. Construction is the only sector that allows card-based certification.

The way any other workplace gets unionized under provincial law currently takes another step. The law requires a union show at least 40 per cent of employees signed union membership cards, which is followed by a secret ballot vote supervised by the Ontario Labour Relations Board. The two-step system was introduced in 1995, by Elizabeth Witmer, then-labour minister in former Progressive Conservative premier Mike Harris's cabinet. In 2005, the Liberal government restored card-check certification in the construction industry.

A day before McDonell pulled the bill, on Tuesday, Labour Minister Kevin Flynn accused Brown of being "hypocritical" for raising questions in the house about protecting assets for domestic unions that may be placed into trusteeship by their international parent-unions, while Bill 83 sat on the order paper. Flynn charged Bill 83 would hurt and disrupt labour relations in the construction field.

"The Progressive Conservatives haven't, in my opinion, been the friends of the working people in this province," Flynn said at the time.

Brown was not available to reporters Thursday, but he said earlier this week he was disappointed at the minister's "partisan" response. He said he supports all workers in Ontario, whether they belong to a union or not.

"My philosophy is, I don't care if it's a left-wing idea or a right-wing idea – it's what's in the best interest of Ontario," Brown added.

The NDP have tabled a private member's bill that would have the opposite effect of the PC's now-dead Bill 83, to eliminate the need for the secret-ballot vote. The NDP's version would only require the first step, so the union would be legitimate after enough cards are signed.

While unions have been calling for a return to the card-check certification system, business groups have rallied against it.

Flynn has said card-check certification will be addressed as part of the Changing Workplaces review, which will overhaul the Labour Relations Act and Employment Standards Act for the first time in roughly two decades. A final report and recommendations from Flynn's special advisers is due for public release any day now.

Top

3). 'Confidential' document casts cloud over tabling of Liberal

By: Geoff Zochodne

The calls are allegedly coming from inside the house.

The Progressive Conservatives emailed reporters a potentially damaging and purportedly confidential cabinet document Tuesday, mere minutes before Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault was set to table the Liberal government's Fair Hydro Act, which outlines the Grit plan to reduce household electricity bills by an average of 25 per cent.

The document – titled "GLOBAL ADJUSTMENT (GA) SMOOTHING" and marked "CONFIDENTIAL CABINET DOCUMENT" – shows the average monthly household electricity bill will fall from $158 in 2016, to $123 in 2017, under the Liberals' hydro plan, but then begin rising again in the years that follow, increasing to $126 per month in 2018, $128 in 2019 and $131 in 2020.

http://www.qpbriefing.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/flog-768x512.png

According to the document, by 2024, the average bill would be back above the 2016 level, at $161 monthly. The costs to consumers are then projected to rise past $200 by 2028 and peak in 2047, reaching $231 a month.

PC energy critic Todd Smith thanked whoever had sent them the document, and referred to the source of the document as a "whistleblower."

"We've been talking with a lot of people who work in the ministry that are upset about the state of affairs when it comes to the Ministry of Energy and our electricity system in Ontario," Smith said. "And a lot of them have shared their concerns with me as the relatively new energy critic for the PC caucus and our leader Patrick Brown as well."

"Because the government isn't being honest with the people of Ontario when it comes to the price of electricity," Smith added. "We are going to see electricity prices, electricity bills, skyrocket after the next election."

Thibeault said he couldn't comment on one graph when he'd "seen literally thousands of graphs" since becoming energy minister nearly a year ago.

"So for any confidential document, I can't verify it," Thibeault said. "But what I can tell you is the number is inaccurate."

The minister said the government's long-term energy plan, when it is released, will contain the government's projections for the cost of power.

"It's not a coincidence on me, and it shouldn't be a coincidence on anyone in the media gallery, that on the day that we announce that we're bringing forward a plan that is going to be reducing families' bills by 25 per cent, is the same day that a party that doesn't have a plan brings forward this document," Thibeault added. "To me, that's not a coincidence."

NDP MPP Peter Tabuns said he wouldn't be surprised if the PCs' document was legitimate. "The idea that someone would get so upset and leak a document seems reasonable to me."

"[The Liberals] piled enough money on top of it that they can make it look good for a bit, but it's all going to burst out again," Tabuns said.

Meanwhile, Thibeault tabled the Fair Hydro Act in the legislature Thursday afternoon. The legislation outlines the Liberals' "Fair Hydro Plan" that the government says will reduce household electricity bills by an average of 25 per cent.

The plan, which was first announced at the beginning of March, involves borrowing approximately $2.5 billion a year, for 10 years, to reduce the global adjustment charge electricity customers pay. Consumers will cover the interest on that debt, with annual payments of no more than $1.4 billion, the government says.

The Liberals have named this charge, which will show up as a separate line item on hydro bills, the "Clean Energy Adjustment." Thibeault said customers will start paying the charge in the mid to late 2020s; the PCs' document shows the refinancing plan will start costing customers money come 2026. By 2028, the document predicts, the refinancing will cost consumers an extra $21.80 per month.

Both Thibeault and Premier Kathleen Wynne have admitted the Liberals' hydro plan will cost more in the long run, but that it is needed to cut people a break in the present.

"We are working hard right now to continue to pull costs out of the system," Thibeault told reporters.

The global adjustment charge is the difference between the market price of electricity and

what power producers are guarantee under their contracts and agreements with the province, which is usually higher than the market price. The global adjustment also covers the cost of conservation programs.

Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said in her 2015 annual report that global adjustment fees added up to $37 billion from 2006 to 2014, and that they were estimated to cost another $133 billion from 2015 to 2032. The Tories' document says global adjustment costs totalled $12.3 billion last year, half of which was due to nuclear and natural gas power.

To pull off this "refinancing" of the global adjustment, as the government calls it, the Liberals will use Ontario Power Generation to borrow the money that's needed. Electricity customers will pay less global adjustment, and OPG will give the Independent Electricity System Operator, the provincial agency that manages the power grid, borrowed money to make up the difference to the companies providing the energy.

The Liberal government's rationale for this part of their hydro plan is that much of Ontario's electricity infrastructure will last longer than initially contracted for, and customers shouldn't have to bear so much of the upfront cost.

The Tories' document also shows the debt that will accrue because of the plan. Approximately $2.5 billion will be borrowed this year, it shows, and the debt load will hit an estimated high of $27.7 billion by 2027. The document projects the debt for the hydro plan will be paid off by 2047.

A government backgrounder says that the "initial analysis" is that the debt won't top $28 billion, which OPG president Jeff Lyash said will be tucked away in a special entity the company will create. Thibeault and Lyash agreed OPG was the right organization to manage the refinancing because of its experience going to the bond market to pay for projects.

The other parts of the Liberals' hydro plan include the 8-per-cent rebate that began in January, and the removal of the cost of social assistance programs from hydro bills, with those measures being enhanced and paid for using tax dollars. This will cost another $5.5 billion over three years, the government estimates.

The government also says its bill will allow future bill increases to be set by regulation, allowing the Liberals to hold increases to the rate of inflation for four years.

Top

4). Opposition accuses Liberals of 'just jamming' bills through

By: Geoff Zochodne

The Liberal government's critics are complaining that the Grits aren't giving them enough time to criticize.

The legislature is currently scheduled to rise for the summer on June 1, and the Liberals have either time-allocated or plan to time-allocate legislation that will enact their sweeping budget and hydro plans.

"This is just jamming this through at the end of the session," said NDP MPP Peter Tabuns on Thursday.

The Liberals passed a time-allocation motion Thursday morning that could see Bill 127, the government's 33-schedule budget bill, through the legislature five days from now. The schedule, which was opposed by the Progressive Conservatives and NDP, would allow for six hours of public hearings at the committee stage. It would also see the bill debated for a total of 30 minutes at third reading.

Government House Leader Yasir Naqvi said it was a "very important bill" because of the Liberals' plan for free prescription medication for Ontarians under 25, as well as the added funding contained in the budget for schools and hospitals. He told QP Briefing it was the government's intention to pass the bill before the summer.

"I think we know everybody's views on this bill," Naqvi said. "We feel that 30 minutes are sufficient in terms of third reading, if there are any changes made to the bill."

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault then said Thursday afternoon that the government intends to move quickly with Bill 132, the Fair Hydro Act, which outlines the Liberals' plan to reduce electricity bills by an average of 25 per cent. Thibeault said that the government wanted the bill passed so that Ontarians would be enjoying their savings by Canada Day, which would entail passing it by June 1.

The minister said "there's plenty of time" for the opposition to review the bill, given the briefings the government intends to provide.

"As we've recently seen in the house, the opposition can seek to delay or undermine passage of important pieces of legislation, but I think it's important to say our government isn't playing games with this one," Thibeault told reporters.

This didn't sit well with the opposition. PC energy critic Todd Smith said both the issue and the government were "desperate."

"Clearly the government has rushed this legislation," Smith said.

Top