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QP BRIEFING

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Articles

1). Ontario Liberals could be on comeback trail, a poll sugges

By: Geoff Zochodne

There finally may be a light at the end of the tunnel for the Ontario Liberals.

After many months of trailing in the polls – years, even – a survey by Campaign Research suggests the Grits could have managed to claw their way back into contention using promises such as pharmacare and lower hydro bills.

The online poll sampled the opinions of 864 Ontario voters, 37 per cent of whom said they would vote Liberal if a provincial election were held tomorrow. Another 34 per cent said they would support the Progressive Conservatives, within the poll's margin of error, and 22 per cent were backing the NDP.

Campaign Research CEO Eli Yufest chalked up the Liberals' improvement to their recent policy announcements, such as pharmacare for Ontarians under the age of 25 and the government's plan to reduce the average hydro bill by another 17 per cent. The government also recently tabled its first balanced budget since 2008, unveiling reforms aimed at cooling the real estate market and details of its basic income pilot project, which proved popular among voters in another Campaign Research poll.

“We know that that’s what’s driving the strong results we’re seeing for the Liberals,” Yufest told QP Briefing in an interview. “What the electorate hears, they like.”

But Premier Kathleen Wynne’s approval rating is up only slightly in the poll (provided exclusively to QP Briefing; it can be viewed below), to just 19 percent, a two percentage point improvement over a Campaign Research survey done in April.

The latest poll asked if voters think Wynne will still be Liberal leader come the next election, scheduled for June 7, 2018. Of those surveyed, 42 per cent said Wynne will still be leading the Grits, while 26 per cent predicted she would be gone and 34 per cent weren't sure.

PC Leader Patrick Brown’s approval rating was sitting at 29 per cent in the latest Campaign Research poll (up from 24 per cent in April) and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath was winning the popularity contest with 40-per-cent support (up a single percentage point from April). The poll found that 35 per cent of the voters thought the PCs will win the 2018 election, while 25 per cent picked the Liberals and 11 per cent bet on the NDP.

Yufest, however, said the Liberal government's current position still allows them to set the political agenda, and pointed out that Brown remains unknown to many voters. The Campaign Research poll found 47 per cent of those surveyed had no opinion of the PC Leader.

“He basically has the largest number of people that just don’t know anything about him," Yufest said.

But the poll's findings break a long string of surveys that showed the Grits trailing the Tories. An April poll by Campaign Research pegged Liberal support at 31 per cent, while the PCs and NDP had 36 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively. A recent Forum Research poll had the Tories at 41 per cent, the Liberals at 28 per cent and the NDP at 23 per cent.

“What happens in the future, I can’t tell you for sure," Yufest said. "But I can tell you the Liberals are clearly on the right track with their recent announcements, and the results of the poll clearly show that."

The online poll was done between May 9 and 13. Campaign Research says a sample of this size would have a margin of error of four percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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2). Cancelled and relocated gas plants making progress

By: Geoff Zochodne

The cancelled gas plants are growing up.

Natural gas-fired power plants in Napanee and near Sarnia are getting closer to providing the electricity that the Liberal government of then-premier Dalton McGuinty originally envisioned — before it made the $1-billion decision to kibosh the original plans to build those facilities in Mississauga and Oakville.

TransCanada, owner of the 900-megawatt Napanee plant, has applied to the Ontario Energy Board for a licence to generate electricity at the facility. The Eastern Ontario plant is still under construction and is expected to be in service for the fourth quarter of 2018, according to TransCanada spokesperson Jennifer Link.

The cost of the Napanee project is $1.2 billion, Link said. However, Ontario’s auditor general infamously estimated that the cost of cancelling, rebuilding and relocating the facility from Oakville to Napanee would cost ratepayers and taxpayers as much as $815 million.

The Liberal government, now headed by Premier Kathleen Wynne, says it remains committed to the Napanee plant.

"The Napanee Generating station is part of our plan to meet Ontario’s electricity needs and has been for years," said Colin Nekolaichuk, spokesperson for Energy Minister Glenn

Thibeault, in an email. "That's why it's included in both the 2013 Long Term Energy Plan and the 2016 Ontario Planning Outlook. As noted in those plans, it's expected to provide necessary capacity during times of peak demand."

The decision to scotch the Oakville plant was announced by the McGuinty government in October 2010, ahead of the 2011 election. The Liberals then made a campaign-trail promise in September 2011 to cancel and relocate another gas plant, in Mississauga, and move it to the Sarnia area – which the auditor general estimated would cost $275 million.

That plant, run by Greenfield South Power Corp., recently registered with the Independent Electricity System Operator to participate in the province's power grid, according to the Sarnia Observer. Construction on the $360-million plant began in 2013, but reportedly ran into some labour trouble along the way.

Cancelling and moving the gas plants was made in the face of opposition from the locals in Mississauga and Oakville, but the political fallout continues the haunt the Liberals. Two former aides to McGuinty are headed to trial in September on charges of breach of trust mischief in relation to data and misuse of a computer system to commit mischief.

The charges are over allegedly deleted emails tied to the cancellation of the two gas plants ahead of the 2011 election. Both of the accused have denied any wrongdoing.

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3). Auditor general scolds government over hydro rebate prom

By: Christopher Reynolds

Ontario's auditor general has called out the government on hydro plan inserts mailed en masse to ratepayers across the province, saying the literature violates the spirit of laws around taxpayer-funded advertising.

The dressing down is the latest round in a continuing feud between the legislative watchdog and the Liberal government over allegedly partisan advertising paid for by the public. Multiple shots have been fired since 2015, when new rules diluted the auditor general's power to spike ads that promote the ruling party.

"While the letter of the law was not broken, the intent or spirit of the act was," said Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk in a May 10 letter to Progressive Conservative MPP Todd Smith, who had written to the watchdog back in April about the inserts. Her statement was in reference to a parallel situation from 2011. "The same could be said of the material you brought to my attention," Lysyk said.

http://www.qpbriefing.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/hydro-insert-1024x398.jpg

The auditor also highlighted how current legislation allowed the government to circumvent her office, since mail-outs sent to individual addresses - in this case via utility bills - do not technically constitute "bulk mail" under the Government Advertising Act.

The law states that print, broadcast and digital ads along with bulk mail paid for by the government must be approved by the auditor general before they can run to ensure non-partisanship.

The inserts touted the 8-per-cent tax rebate on electricity bills that's equal to the provincial portion of the HST.

"On January 1, 2017, your electricity costs went down 8%," one mail-out begins. "That's an 8% rebate for Ontario families, and on average will mean $130 more in your pocket each year."

Energy Minister Glenn Thibeault said the inserts "are not partisan ads" and were merely a matter of keeping ratepayers up to date.

"We were making sure that people knew about the eight per cent reduction ... Again, it just shows that the Conservatives are trying to distract from the fact that folks will get 25 per cent

off their bills once this legislation passes."

Thibeault also claimed that "this could be something ... that an LDC [local distribution company] did on their own."

Several distributors told QP Briefing they sent out the inserts at the direction of the Ontario Energy Board. One distributor, Alectra, said that the insert was provided by the Ministry of Energy and distributed under its direction.

"This is a mandatory communication that all local distribution companies in the province must provide to their customers," said Toronto Hydro spokesperson Tori Gass. "This is something that happens each time there's a change to rates."

An Ontario Energy Board spokesperson denied the OEB instructed distributors to include the insert. "They've been doing these for years," said Lars Hansen.

Smith, the PC energy critic, called on the government to close the bulk mail "loophole."

"Electricity customers are paying the bill for Kathleen Wynne's Liberal election campaign. I think it's disgusting and it should be stopped," Smith said. "This is self-serving self-promotion by a desperate premier whose approval rating is circling the drain."

The spat is just the latest to crop up after the Liberals amended the original ad legislation in 2015, which "weakened the act and opened the door to publicly funded partisan and self-congratulatory government advertising," the auditor general stated in her annual report from 2016. The changes sidelined the auditor general's discretionary authority to reject ads, replacing it with a "narrow definition of what is partisan" and transforming the office into a "rubber stamp" clearinghouse, Lysyk wrote.

Government ads are now considered partisan only if they include the name, voice or image of an MPP; feature a party name, logo or associated colour; or call out a specific MPP.

Since June 16, 2015, when the amendments took effect, the auditor general has approved ads for education, health care, pensions, the environment and infrastructure, all of which sought "to promote the government's partisan political interests or give the government credit for its accomplishments, rather than inform its citizens," Lysyk wrote.

Earlier this week, the Tories attempted to nail the Grits with a contempt ruling, for the second time, over government ads promoting the Liberals' Fair Hydro Plan.

The auditor general said in her letter those radio ads "would not have passed our review" under the old legislation, calling them "misleading and self-congratulatory."

The auditor general first called attention to a potential bulk mail loophole in its 2011 annual report, stating that the government included inserts trumpeting the Ontario Clean Energy Benefit alongside electricity bills.

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4). Budget, hydro, housing bills chug through house after proc

By: Sabrina Nanji

The budget bill is the latest example of the Liberal government's procedural manoeuvring to get major pieces of legislation through the house before the end of the spring sitting.

Bill 127, the legislation to enshrine measures included April's budget, passed 53 to 44 (Liberals in favour, PCs and NDP against) Wednesday, with just five sitting days to go before the house rises for summer break on June 1.

Much to the chagrin of the opposition parties, government house leader Yasir Naqvi had time-allocated the 33-schedule omnibus budget bill last week – speeding it through six hours of public hearings at committee, and offering just 30 minutes of third-reading debate to split between the three parties.

Naqvi said it was "extremely important" the budget passed so that work can begin on implementing its centerpiece - pharmacare for children and youth under 25, billed as OHIP+.

But there is so much remaining on the order paper that the Liberals want to pass in the next two weeks that the New Democrats want another sitting week to scrutinize. That includes legislation to enact the so-called Fair Hydro Plan.

Bill 132, the Fair Hydro Act, is being time-allocated, too – after NDP Leader Andrea Horwath unsuccessfully tried to get unanimous consent Wednesday morning to extend the spring sitting by one week to "make sure the bill got the kind of scrutiny and public input it deserves." Todd Smith, the Progressive Conservative energy critic, has previously called the hydro legislation "rushed."

It's expected to pass given that the majority of MPPs sit on Liberal benches, and would enact the additional 17-per-cent hydro rate reduction, on top of the already effective 8-per-cent HST rebate. As with the budget bill, the opposition parties say they will vote against it, especially in light of leaked cabinet documents that suggest hydro rates will increase again after dropping in 2017.

"This legislature will have had about seven hours of debate on this bill. Seven hours, speaker, for legislation that will impact people's lives for the next 30 years. It's ludicrous. Why does this Premier insist upon ramming this legislation through the house?" Horwath said in question period.

Premier Kathleen Wynne fired back that the New Democrats were more preoccupied with fancy procedural footwork than policy-making. "It is actually very surprising that the NDP has indicated they will vote against both those measures. They would rather focus on procedural mechanisms and games than actually deal with the substance."

Instead of eating into summer break the Liberals decided to add two additional days of public hearings to let folks weigh in on the hydro relief plan.

The time-allocation motion would allow for 18 hours of public hearings next Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at the standing committee on justice policy, followed by clause-by-clause consideration on the Monday after, which could go until midnight. The hydro bill would then be sent back to the house no later than May 30 for a half-hour of third-reading debate, divided between the three parties, after which it will be voted on and, presumably, signed into law by the Lieutenant Governor.

The two extra days were not enough to satisfy Horwath, who pointed out the hearings are happening in Toronto only.

"Why won't the people in London be able to have their say – or the people in Windsor, or in Ottawa, or in Thunder Bay or anywhere else outside of Toronto?" she said. "Shame on them [the Liberals] for trying to really shut down the public's opportunity to have a say on this legislation that's going to impact the people of this province for the next 30 years or more."

Naqvi chided both opposition parties for voting against easing the hydro-bill burden for Ontarians, something Horwath diminished as "spin."

Naqvi said it is "very important" Bill 132 becomes law before summer because it gives the Ontario Energy Board 15 days, from when it receives royal assent, to lower hydro rates by an overall average 25-per-cent this summer as promised.

"The NDP say that they haven't had enough time to debate this bill, yet they announced their opposition to this bill within the first hour of [its] introduction … Clearly, their minds are made up. They don't want to help Ontarians," Naqvi said.

Legislation tied to the housing affordability plan is chugging through the house this week, too – Bill 124, to implement caps on rent increases for all private units, is scheduled for third reading Thursday.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa also tabled legislation Wednesday to levy the foreign buyers'

tax in the GTHA and provide a public transit tax credit for those over 65. That bill, the Budget Measures Act, is scheduled for second reading Thursday afternoon.

Bill 87, the Protecting Patients Act, was also time-allocated Wednesday morning, then sent to committee for clause-by-clause consideration. It's due back to the house Thursday and, if it passes third reading, will expand the definition of sexual abuse and allow suspension of doctors before a finding of guilt.

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