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Subject: QP Briefing: Tories cry contempt over ads promoting Liberal hydro plan

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March 20, 2017

Tories cry contempt over ads promoting Liberal hydro plan

By Geoff Zochodne

The PCs say the ads are appearing before the government tables legislation needed to enact its hydro plan.

The Progressive Conservatives say advertisements promoting the Liberals' plan to cut hydro costs are putting the cart before the horse - and the government in contempt of provincial parliament.

PC House Leader **Jim Wilson** rose on a point of privilege Monday morning, accusing the government of committing a "prima facie" case of contempt against the legislature. The Grits did so, he alleged, because the new ads were broadcast before the Liberal government backed up their hydro plan with promised legislation, thereby insulting the legislature's role in the process.

"The advertising in question explicitly envisions a timeline and outcome for legislation which has yet to be introduced in the Legislature," said Wilson. "That is why, in all of our releases, both sides of the House to this day from that ruling, we all say 'if passed by the Legislature.' This advertising makes no mention of 'if passed by this Legislature' in any of its forms, whether in social media or the radio."

One of the Liberal backgrounders outlining their "Fair Hydro Plan" says that the government "intends to introduce legislation" to refinance electricity generation costs.

"[The ads] are blatantly partisan, and [the Liberals] are littering radio stations and social media in a sad attempt to save this government's falling popularity," said PC Leader **Patrick Brown** during Monday's question period.

Premier **Kathleen Wynne** fired back that the Liberals had reformed the government ad rules after taking over for the Tories in 2003. Prior to the change, the first minister had been allowed to appear in ads, as ex-premier **Mike Harris** had done on occasion.

"Chaos was reigning, and the premier of the day had his face all over advertising," Wynne said. "We changed those rules."

The new ads targeted by the Tories inform radio listeners that they'll soon receive an average 25-per-cent cut to their electricity bill, which includes the 8-per-cent HST rebate the Liberals first promised last September. Auditor General **Bonnie Lysyk**, a frequent critic of the government's promotions, has already said the ads wouldn't have been approved by her office under the old rules, which the Liberals changed in 2015.

In defending themselves against the contempt charge, the Liberals maintain there is no bill in the house yet, and therefore, "no proceeding to obstruct," said Government House Leader **Yasir Naqvi**. The Liberal government also claims it has the right to implement its policies at its own pace.

"Given that there is no bill or proceeding before the House, the very premise of privilege does not exist," Naqvi added. "As part of its function, the government has a responsibility to raise awareness and communicate information about programs and services that affect Ontarians. This includes informing Ontarians of changes to their electricity bills so that they can use this information to plan for the future as they manage their household budgets."

Energy Minister **Glenn Thibeault**, against whom the contempt allegation is specifically aimed, says the Liberal government has spent "under a million dollars" on the ad campaign thus far. He said the campaign would be "in line" with what the government has spent previously, and suggested this would mean radio, television, print and social media ads.

"The more I talk to people in the province about the programs that we have, it just reminds me that we need to

continue to do more to let people know about these programs," Thibeault told reporters.

NDP Leader **Andrea Horwath** said the Liberals still haven't revealed their "phantom plan" to reduce hydro rates, but are still promoting their policies.

"Now they're once again using public money – public money – to buy advertising to help themselves politically as opposed to doing the right thing for the people of Ontario," Horwath said.

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