

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Provincial Politics Summer 2016

By Stephen Somerville

I imagine that the last thing any of you want to think about - or read about for that matter - during the summer is provincial politics. But, a GTA by-election is just around the corner with a provincial general election slated for 2018.

You may have heard about the provincial by-election that is set to take place on September 1 in the Scarborough-Rouge River Riding.

The Scarborough-Rouge River vacancy was caused by then Liberal Bas Balkissoon, who resigned in March after 11 years as an MPP.

According to the Toronto Star, "Long public transit times to downtown and high electricity bills are big issues with voters, along with a push for better local health care and concerns about expensive car insurance rates in Scarborough."

With just under two years until the next provincial election, the by-election is a test of strength for the Liberal government's fortress Toronto, where it holds all but two seats that are in NDP hands.

It's also a barometer for new Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown, who has made determined efforts to reach out to cultural communities that are well represented in Scarborough-Rouge River.

Although Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne's government trailed the PCs by 13 points in a Forum Research poll this week and her own popularity ranks below both NDP Leader Andrea Horwath and Brown, the Liberals are counting on their long history of representing the area and the popularity of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to help carry the riding.

Sounds like September 1 will be an interesting day for the voters in Scarborough-Rouge River!

I am happy to see that energy policy and high electricity bills are on people's minds.

The Liberals and Tories have fundamentally different views on most items in this sector, from new nuclear (Tories want them, Liberals most likely opposed) and renewables (Liberals Feed-In Tariff Program, while Tories adamantly opposed).

As part of the overall policy discussion I was hoping that there would be a long overdue debate on the cost, scope, reach and delivery of government.

Ontario has a large annual deficit and accumulated debt. We need to have an adult conversation about the difficult choices that face our public policy makers.

After witnessing the fiscal events in Europe a few years back and the problems in debt laden Greece, the people of Ontario understand that fiscal prudence is important and all public finance options should be at least laid out for examination by tax payers. But whether it is the federal government or the provincial government, the size of the public service can't continue to outstrip and outgrow the capacity of the private sector ability to create wealth to pay for these services.

To govern is to choose. And public finance is not about technical wizardry, but about making choices, and in many cases, tough choices.

Provincial governments can do one of a number of things to deal with the deficit/debt situation. These include raise taxes, cutting expenditures, selling public assets and/or increasing the efficiency of public service delivery.

There is also another issue that really is a ticking time bomb, and as tax payers, will ultimately affect all of us, and thus deserves to become part of the electoral cycle discourse: public sector pensions.

As a Toronto Star story mentioned a while back, "both private and government-sponsored pension plans across the country are facing deficits as a result of falling stock market returns, historically low interest rates and changing demographics."

In a lot of cases, defined pension plans don't have enough money to cover the plan's obligations to retirees. The amount of this unfunded liability is huge.

The experts tell us that there are a number of solutions to the issue including increasing the age of retirement and have employers and employees contribute equally.

A thorough discussion of this issue is needed.

But for now, go back to your summer barbecues and working on that golf game.

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