

BROCK'S BANTER: Dumpster Fire Sale

By Brock Weir

Whatever happened to all those people who claimed Provincial politics is boring?

Are they sitting down at a Family Day brunch ready to eat their words, or are they still lavishing comfortably in their respective cones of silence?

Let's hope it is the former because there is no Ontarian even mildly engaged in the world around them who would ? or could ? say that the last seven days in the race to transform Queen's Park by this summer's Provincial election has been anything close to boring. Last week started out innocuously enough. In fact, it started out in one of the most pedestrian ways possible: warming up an old argument that has been cooling and coagulating on a turned-off backburner for well over a year.

?Ontario families continue to pay more for Kathleen Wynne's Hydro One fire sale? blared the subject line of an email I received from the Progressive Conservative party offices on Monday.

You can probably guess what followed, but I will place it here for posterity's sake.

?Since Day One, the Ontario PCs have opposed Kathleen Wynne's fire sale of Hydro One,? said Ontario PC Energy Critic Todd Smith in the statement. ?Their fire sale has driven up the cost of living for families, seniors, and businesses and today we have more proof that this fire sale means long-term pain for short-term Wynne Liberal gain.?

The statement went on to claim that the ?fire sale? was ?only about balancing the budget in an election year,? losing Ontarians \$1.1 billion in the process in year-ahead forecasts.

?The Liberals like to talk a big game on infrastructure, but the Hydro One fire sale was never about investing in infrastructure,? continued MPP Lisa MacLeod, Finance Critic for the PC Party. ?This was about cooking the books in an election year while Liberal donors and insiders get rich.?

Added Smith, ?Under Kathleen Wynne's watch, families are struggling to make ends meet while the Hydro One CEO applies for rate increases to pay for millions of dollars in raises for executives. Not only that, Hydro One continues to spend billions of dollars on foreign dirty coal-burning companies while Ontario families are paying more and getting less.?

Sound arguments all, but while the Progressive Conservatives might have been making valid comments about a so-called fire sale, elsewhere in the PC party, sparks were being set off which seems to have led to the ignition of a veritable dumpster fire of their own making.

A few weeks ago when the Progressive Conservative leadership position became vacant following the surprise resignation of Patrick Brown, a move which the former leader argued for a moment was a surprise to him as well, I wrote on the subject of how they were going to replace him.

At the time, the party was fresh off the decision to open the leadership contest up to its full membership base, a decision it seems was made with less than unanimity within the party itself.

?The Progressive Conservatives have an energized membership base which previous PC slates, and indeed slates of any particular stripe down through time, would envy and it would be a shame not to harness this energy when picking a new leader,? I wrote. ?That being said, opening the leadership up to the entire voting base of the Progressive Conservative party does open up the possibility of sweeping in a new leader, potentially one from outside the current crop of MPPs and confirmed candidates, who do not buy into the platform outlined by the now previous leader in the People's Guarantee.?

It only took until Thursday for this to become abundantly clear when what was then a quartet of leadership candidates ? former MPP Christine Elliott, former Toronto councillor Doug Ford, lobbyist Tanya Granic Allen, and political newcomer and York-Simcoe PC candidate Caroline Mulroney ? sat down with Steve Paikin for the first leadership ?debate? of this hotly contested race.

Less a debate and more a political roundtable, it was the first time we were able to see how the hopefuls differed from one another. While there were indeed differences, from style to their vision if granted a mandate, I was struck by their similarities, from their near unanimous rejection of the controversial hike in minimum wage, as well as their unanimous rejection of a carbon tax, a key pillar of the People's Guarantee, the very platform which was, just a few short weeks ago, slated to be the cornerstone of their party's campaign ? a campaign with just more than 100 days before its thrilling conclusion.

So, what does this mean for a party which, at press time, is readying to meet its fate at the polls in June? 105 days of hand-wringing to see how this turns out and, by the time the leader taking them into the 2018 election is crowned, less than 90 days to craft a platform that suits them and their alleged 200,000-strong membership base.

It is a very tight situation, and one I am sure leaves party faithful sweating, but a day is a long time in politics.

Little more than 12 hours after the first debate, interim party leader Vic Fedeli announced his decision to oust Patrick Brown from the PC caucus and, just a few hours after that, Brown dramatically showed up at PC party headquarters to throw his hat into the race to replace himself.

Swept aside were any questions that first debate raised, along with any of the inroads the other four might have made in reaching a new audience or tapping into an untapped group of potential supporters and, once again, the entire race was thrown into disarray. Once again, discussions over ideas and a clear vision for this province have been swept aside by discussions over personalities and the court of public opinion. While Mr. Brown has every right to be in this race and to clear his name if the allegations that led to his resignation ultimately do prove false, one has to wonder if there is enough time for any member of this leadership quintet to extinguish the dumpster fire.

On Friday, when Brown's next move became clear, a CTV commentator said, "Kathleen Wynne just sent Patrick Brown a box of muffins," implying that the path was being swept for her to claim victory once again.

That might be a bit too hasty, but it does seem that once again, after the religious schools disaster and the 100,000 Jobs fiasco, that the party is once again coming to a sword fight with an unsharpened pencil.