

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Provincial

Potential Issues in a provincial election

By Stephen Somerville

I imagine that the last thing any of you want to think about ? or read about for that matter during this spring ? is provincial politics. Most people would rather get their gardens in shape or head out to the golf course.

However, the Provincial Budget is set to be tabled on May 1 and we could very well have an election shortly after that.

Current polls show a horse race with the Tories up or at least tied with the Liberals with the NDP not too far behind.

The next election should be an interesting one.

At first glance, the Opposition Tories should be well placed to attain the high seals of office, given that the Liberals have been in power for over a decade, their ongoing struggles to get the provincial deficit and debt under control and the continuing scrutiny and accompanying fallout of their costly decisions to cancel the power plants in Mississauga and Oakville.

As well, the resurgent NDP may chip away at the Liberals ideological turf, but current polls show that the Liberals are far from done, and Ms. Wynne has proven to be an adroit politician.

A spring election would likely be fought on a couple of areas.

First, and foremost the economy and private sector job growth.

As part of this discussion, I really hope that there is the long overdue debate on the cost, scope, reach and delivery of government.

The second issue is transit.

Everyone agrees that something needs to be done about our aging transit infrastructure in the GTA, but there is no such consensus when it comes to how to pay for the \$50 billion price tag.

The Liberals like to discuss various revenue tools (i.e. mostly tax measures) that they can use to raise the \$2 billion needed annually.

The Tories don't want to see any of these measures used until the Liberals get their own fiscal house in order.

And polls don't really point to a magic formula to raise the \$2 billion.

According to a May, 2013 poll by Forum Research, none of four favoured new taxes recommended by Metrolinx to pay for transit in to the Toronto region had more than 45% popular support.

Only 42% of respondents approved a 15% increase in the charges developers pay. 25% approved a 5 cent per litre gas tax. 43% approved a regional parking levy of 25 cents per space per day and only 27% approved a 1% sales tax hike in Ontario.

What is also interesting is the regional breakdown of the polling numbers. There is no consensus either in the 905 area, where we reside. 45% support a developer levy. 13% approve a gas tax, and 33% support a parking levy. 32% support a hike in the HST.

Looking at these numbers shows that gaining the political support to do anything will be difficult for the Premier.

One thing is certain; raising the HST on a province wide basis to help shore up transit in the GTA is a non starter for those outside this area.

Third is energy policy. Energy is extremely important and is inextricably intertwined with economic policy. And the decisions made by our public officials affect our provinces' competitiveness and productivity, and ultimately our standard of living.

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).

One thing to keep in mind regarding energy is that Ontario is a goods producing province and we need low cost energy production as part of the equation that includes well trained workers, good transportation and infrastructure and competitive tax rates.

There is 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 recent Toronto Star story mentions, ?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 having employers and employees contribute equally.

A thorough discussion of this issue is needed.

Electoral platforms and campaigns do matter. Clearly drawn policy battle lines between the parties could engage and galvanize

voters and volunteers alike.

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