

Editorial ? A royal commission may be needed

With the Ontario Legislature back in session, one of the first jobs will be to appoint committees, one of which will resume hearings into the scandalous cancellation of natural gas power plants in Oakville and Mississauga.

Thus far, the Conservative and New Democrat members of the committee have succeeded in establishing that the cancellations will likely cost power consumers and/or taxpayers more than \$1 billion, and that an apparent coverup within the office of former premier Dalton McGuinty included the 'wiping' of computer hard drives.

However, little or nothing has come to light concerning how it came to be that the two projects were located in areas where fierce local opposition should have been expected.

Now that the Liberals have a majority of Legislature seats, they can also dominate house committees and can thus be expected to cut off debate on both the costliness of the cancellations and the potential criminality involved in destroying emails, a matter properly being handled by the Ontario Provincial Police.

In the circumstances, we think the committee should delve rather deeply into the matter of the processes involved in the area of power planning, and not just in the particular process that led to the scandal.

And one of the first questions that ought to be addressed is whether the matter is sufficiently important and complex that it should be referred to a royal commission with a mandate to recommend not just how future power planning should be undertaken but what sort of entity should undertake the task, as well as what role should be played by the government and/or the Legislature.

Historically, that task was handled by Ontario Hydro, with the government's role mainly as a guarantor of the utility's debt and as the utility's bargaining agent with the federal governments of the day after it was decided to embark on a unique design of nuclear power plants that required close cooperation between Hydro and Atomic Energy of Canada Limited, which until recently was a federal agency.

Hydro's reputation in the area of power planning nose-dived in the 1970s when an expected growth in demand for electricity failed to materialize.

The result was abandonment of some projects and the costly slowing of construction on the Darlington Generating Station.

More recently, power planning became enormously politicized, with the Ontario Liberals promising to close all the province's coal-fired stations and to replace the lost generating capacity with 'green energy,' particularly wind and solar projects that produced no greenhouse gases.

That represented a marked departure from the 'power at cost' theme championed by Hydro since the days of its founder, Sir Adam Beck, and happened in the absence of any planning expertise or mandate within what remained of Hydro after its dissolution by the Harris Conservatives. (All we had left was one agency, Ontario Power Generation, to produce power and a second, Hydro One, to transmit it.)

Today, the big issues facing us include the soaring price of electricity, the future of nuclear power, the potential preservation of the huge Nanticoke and Lambton generating stations through their conversion from coal to natural gas, and the strengthening of links with neighbouring utilities in Quebec, Manitoba and the United States.

There's no doubt such matters could be handled by an all-party legislature committee, but realistically only if the members agreed to put politics aside ? something hard to imagine ever happening.