

Jones calls for return of oversight on ads

By Bill Rea

The government is using public funds to promote itself, Sylvia Jones is charging, and she wants it to stop.

In a press conference at Queen's Park yesterday (Wednesday), Dufferin-Caledon's MPP called on the government to support her private member's bill that would put an end to their taxpayer-funded partisan advertisements.

'Life's already too unaffordable under the Liberals,' she said. 'Having taxpayers foot the bill for self-congratulatory and misleading ads is unacceptable.'

Jones pointed out the Liberals amended the Government Advertising Act in 2015 to remove the Auditor General's oversight of government advertisements. Since then, she charged taxpayers have paid for millions of dollars of advertisements that do little more than sell Liberal spin.

The most recent example she cited concerned a series of ads promoting their new hydro plans.

'These ads represent nearly \$1 million going towards Premier Kathleen Wynne's re-election campaign,' Jones said. 'This is taxpayer money that should be going towards desperately needed hydro relief for families, businesses and hospitals.'

'This legislation will restore the Auditor General's ability to review and approve government-funded advertising,' Jones remarked.

'I urge Premier Wynne and her Liberal Caucus to do the right thing, respect taxpayer dollars, and support this legislation.'

She later said the bill is slated to come up for debate in the legislature today (Thursday), but added the Liberals have indicated they are not interested in restoring those powers to the Auditor General.

'While I'm an optimist at heart, I'm not holding my breath,' she remarked after the press conference. 'They can do the right thing . . . or we will make the changes when we're in government.'

Entitled the End the Public Funding of Partisan Government Advertising Act, 2017, Jones introduced it to the legislature Monday. She pointed out the Building Ontario Up Act, 2015, made numerous amendments to the Government Advertising Act, 2004, according to Hansard.

'Among the amendments made were changes to the rules that apply when the Auditor General reviews government advertising,' she added. 'The bill amends the act to reverse those amendments so that the act reads substantially as it did prior to the 2015 amendments.'

This came after the issue of government advertising was raised Monday during Question Period.

Parry Sound-Muskoka MPP Norm Miller had told Wynne that Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk had stated the recent hydro ads 'convey a positive impression of the current government and it's more like a pat-on-the-back type of advertisement.'

He also quoted Lysyk as saying the ads 'would not have passed under the previous legislation.' When the amending bill was passed two years ago, the government had indicated it expanded the oversight on government advertising.

He asked Wynne to explain the apparent contradiction, but the Premier passed the question to Treasury Board President Liz Sandals. She stated the government in Ontario is the only one in the country with an advertising act that lays out rules.

'In fact, the ads in question follow the legislation, are consistent with the rules and the budget has been set out by the Legislature, and they are not in contempt of the legislature,' she stated, according to Hansard.

'I think the minister is forgetting a couple of other facts,' Jones chimed in. 'The facts are that two years ago, you changed the legislation to make the Auditor General a rubber stamp.'

Jones went on to tell the legislature the hydro ads did not represent the first time the government has used taxpayers' money to fund partisan ads.

'The government's pension plan ads cost Ontarians almost \$800,000,' she said. 'The auditor called those ads 'self-congratulatory,' and stated that they had added no value to the public.'

'Will the Premier restore the Auditor General's authority to review and approve government-funded advertising?' Jones asked.

Wynne passed that question on to Government House Leader Yasir Naqvi, who pointed out the Progressive Conservatives, under Mike Harris, had run some \$400 million worth of advertising.

'When this party and this government came into office, one of the earliest actions they took was that they brought in a piece of legislation that would ensure that we do not have that kind of Mike Harris-style government advertising,' Naqvi said.

Jones commented yesterday that Harris has been out of office some 15 years, and that spending would have taken place over the two terms he was premier.

'We have less money to spend now. We have higher debt,' she declared. 'There has got to be a better use for taxpayers' funds.'

She said the government should be advertising things that will help people, such as promoting steps that will help the public

recognize signs of human trafficking.