

Bill Rea ? Referendum on Hydro One?

This is going to astonish some people out there, but I agree with the Ontario new Democrats on one item in particular.

I think the plans of the Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne to sell off a substantial chunk of Hydro One is at best dumb, and at its worst, potentially dangerous.

I admit I come from a strongly capitalistic upbringing. As such, I have a lot of faith in the private sector, but that faith is not unlimited. It is a fact that there are some things that are more appropriate for the public sector to run, and the operation of our hydro electric system is one of them.

People like you and I depend on the power we need to light our lights and run other things that are essential to us all. I want such an operation run according to what the need is, and not what the balance sheets say.

There was a town hall meeting in Brampton on this topic last week. It was held by Provincial NDP Leader Andrea Horwath and Bramalea-Gore-Malton MPP Jagmeet Singh. Granted it was not in Caledon, but I attended any way. For one thing, I was anxious to learn more about this issue that I confess I was not too up on. Besides, I was invited, both by email and a phone call from a representative of the party.

The meeting was interesting, with more than 100 people there. Not surprisingly, the crowd was very partisan, and several of those who spoke identified themselves with their union affiliation.

There were several arguments put forth against the sale that I thought made a lot of sense, including the one I alluded to above about hydro power being too important to too many people for profit margins to be part of it all. There was also the concern that hydro rates would increase if it was privatized.

I believe one of the reasons the government is planning this is because it needs quick money to help it get out of the financial pit it finds itself in. Of course, one of the main reasons they're in this pit is because they dug it themselves. A point Horwath made a couple of times is this government, which is financially strapped, plans to part with hundreds of millions in reliable revenue. And once the sale is done, it's very unlikely it can be undone.

But there were a couple of arguments that simply carry very little clout, such as hammering the Liberals for not bringing up the idea selling off Hydro One during last year's general election. Horwath and company do have a point, but since when is that anything new, for any party?

It's certainly nothing new for the Liberals, who campaigned in 2003 with a promise not to raise taxes, then substantially raised taxes with their first budget after they were elected.

The other parties are not much better, at either the federal or Provincial level.

When Mike Harris was first elected Premier in 1995, the Common Sense Revolution said nothing about creating a megacity in Toronto.

When Brian Mulroney successfully sought re-election in 1988, I can't remember any mention of a Goods and Services Tax (GST), but we got it under his watch. Not to worry, though. Jean Chretien led his Liberals to power on a promise to scrap GST. You'll notice we still have it. And how many majority government's was Chretien elected to lead?

The NDP aren't so pure either. When Bob Rae and company were elected to run things in Ontario, there was never any mention of the Interim Waste Authority (IWA), which was basically set up to scrap the vast amounts of work that had been done at the municipal level to deal with garbage issues. IWA proposed to set up a bunch of massive garbage dumps, and public opinion be damned.

I've never knocked IWA, and I never will. Several local farm families saw their lands under threat by these actions, and the daughter of one of them regularly showed up at the weekly protest meetings. We kept bumping into each other. To cut a long story short, this coming July, she and I will have been married 17 years.

The government didn't get away with it because it takes a lot of time to create a big garbage dump, and the election got in the way.

You can bet the lesson was not lost on Harris. He made sure the megacity was in place before he had to face the electorate again.

This all happened in the face of massive opposition, led by a number of very active citizens, including an aspiring politician by the name of Kathleen Wynne. I was working in Toronto at the time and covered scores of opposition meetings that Wynne chaired. And I'm willing to bet there's a good reason why Wynne timed this thing about three years before the government has to face the electorate again. Smart generals study their opponents and learn from them.

Horwath used last week's meeting, and the good crowd that came out, to drum up support for a fight against this idea. There was lots of enthusiasm for this fight expressed from the floor. The sad fact is this fight is not going to amount to a whole lot.

The issue was settled last June, when the voters of Ontario handed Wynne a majority government, essentially giving her a pass to do

as she pleases for the next four years. That means this deal is going to go through, barring some kind of miracle. There are going to be lots of sound arguments put forth, just as they were during the megacity fight. There will be emotions raised, just as was the case in 1997 when people were fighting the megacity. The Harris government of the day refused to hold a referendum, so the foes of the idea held their own ? Wynne was one of the key organizers. Referendum Day was March 3, 1997, and those who voted (Harris was among those who voted ? matter of public record) opposed the notion, 76.1 per cent strong. As a local community newspaper editor, I was working that night, running between the two victory rallies (I was able to run 18 years ago) ? one at Massey Hall (Wynne was on stage, scrawling results on a flip chart as they came in) and the other in the main foyer at Toronto City Hall. The two buildings are just a couple of blocks apart. Both joints were jumping, filled with passion, enthusiasm and (yeah, I'll use the word) electricity.

Didn't do a bit of good, as subsequent events proved.

But perhaps the people like Horwath who are fighting this sale should think about holding a referendum of their own. It wouldn't be binding (the 1997 one certainly wasn't), but it would be an effective way of measuring public opinion on the sale, which might come in handy at the next election.

If they're looking for advice on how to set such a referendum up, they can consult Wynne. She's an old hand at such matters

