

Was it the mayors or the polls?

EDITORIAL

WHAT WAS IT that caused Premier Doug Ford to announce late last month that the government is reversing its decision to make retroactive funding cuts on municipal public health, ground ambulance and child care programs?

Was it really the widespread opposition to those cuts, particularly by the province's mayors, or was it more likely some recent opinion polls, one of which showed Ontario's leaderless Liberals having almost as much support today as the 40.5 per cent that propelled the Progressive Conservatives into a massive majority of seats in the legislature. That poll put Liberal support at about 39 per cent, with the New Democrats more popular than the governing Tories and the Green Party at 11 per cent.

Another poll showed that Mr. Ford's favourability rating had fallen below that of former premier Kathleen Wynne's at the end of her tenure, while Liberal voters say that John Tory was their preferred choice to lead the Ontario Liberal Party. (A Tory leading the Grits? Really!)

The latter results came from polling by Mainstreet Research involving 996 Ontarians between May 21 and 22.

More and more Ontarians are turning away from Doug Ford as his support is collapsing, said Quito Maggi, President and CEO of Mainstreet Research. We have never seen an incumbent premier reach these depths in popular opinion with barely a year into his mandate.

Premier Ford had a net favourability rating of 53.5 percent. By comparison, Ms. Wynne's net favourability rating stood at 35.3 percent on April 30th, 2018. All the other party leaders fared much better. NDP leader Andrea Horwath's net rating was +20.3 percent, interim Liberal leader John Fraser's was +7.4 percent, and Green Party leader Mike Schreiner has a net rating of +11.4 percent.

The premier and Municipal Affairs Minister Steve Clark stated on May 27 that they had spoken to mayors across Ontario and came to the conclusion that the province should maintain funding for this year.

Every mayor I talked to said they can find savings, so that's the good news, but they said they needed more runway, Mr. Ford said. We're willing to work with them, give them more runway, and this will be a win-win for the taxpayers across Ontario.

Commenting on the provincial announcement, Mayor Tory said that he appreciated the challenges the government faces in getting its budget deficit under control. However, this must be done in a prudent, collaborative manner that does not impact the vital services that people in Toronto rely on each and every day. This can only be done if we work together.

The mayors had argued that it was profoundly unfair to expect them to find retroactive savings after their annual budgets had already been passed.

Asked if the poor polling numbers had prompted his change of heart, Mr. Ford said he had been up and down in the polls before and voters would have a clear choice in the next provincial election (in 1922).

In the circumstances, it will be interesting to see whether all or most of the funding cuts will be imposed next year, particularly when it becomes obvious that in most cases the municipalities will be forced to raise property taxes to compensate for the loss of provincial grants.

And if that is indeed the case, who can say that higher property taxes are somehow preferable to higher provincial taxes on large corporations and wealthy individuals?

As we see it, the big problem facing Ford & Co. is that they cling to a belief that their policies are favoured by most of the electorate.

The reality is that when it comes to the climate change, health care and social services, all three opposition parties, supported by six of 10 voters, have similar policies and are thus critical of the Tories' platform.