

Speech from the Throne:

Ontario Government to Provide Electricity Price Relief, 100,000 Daycare Spaces While Staying the Course on Balancing the Budget and Major Commitments

In today's Speech from the Throne, Premier Kathleen Wynne and the Ontario Liberal government made a determined effort to connect their plan with the pocketbook concerns of Ontarians, and to take charge of a public debate that has regularly put them on the defensive.

The government's throne speech, titled "A Balanced Plan to Build Ontario Up for Everyone" and read by Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell, highlighted several new announcements intended to ease the household budgets of Ontarians, most notably:

- Introducing legislation to create a tax rebate for Ontario residents and small businesses equivalent to the 8% provincial portion of the HST currently applied to electricity bills, effective January 1st, 2017. The government estimates that this will save the typical household \$130 per year, and much more in rural areas; and
- Beginning in 2017, creating 100,000 new licensed daycare spaces across the province for young children ages 0-4.

The throne speech is an important highlight of the legislative calendar in Ontario. It serves to outline the government's plans and priorities for the coming session of the legislature. Throne speeches are most notably delivered at the outset of a new session of Parliament following the election of a new government, but also at the start of a new parliamentary session following the prorogation of the legislature. The reference to "throne" refers to the fact that the speech, although prepared by the government, is read to the members of the legislature by the Lieutenant Governor, the appointed representative of the Queen in Ontario. Delivering the Speech from the Throne is one of the most visible formal functions of Ontario's Lieutenant Governor.

The decision for a whirlwind prorogation, capped off by today's speech, is in direct response to the government's recent public opinion and electoral woes. On September 1st, the Liberals lost a by-election to the Ontario PCs in Scarborough—Rouge River, a suburban Toronto district long-held by the governing party. This breach of the Liberal's Toronto "firewall" has put much-needed wind into the sails of the Ontario PCs, whose leader Patrick Brown continues to be dogged by questions regarding his position on sex-ed curriculum reform. Both parties admit that frustration with high electricity prices, exacerbated by an historically hot summer, was a common theme on the hustings. That the government is seen to be taking action on these and other pocketbook concerns is vitally important if the Ontario Liberals are to begin their recovery in the polls ahead of the Spring 2018 provincial election.

The government will need to execute a disciplined and effective communications plan to cast its new commitments on electricity prices and daycare spaces as reflections of a government in tune with the concerns of ordinary Ontarians, rather than a shallow political response. The cost implications of these new policies will be carefully scrutinized by both the media and the opposition, as any failure by the

government to achieve its commitment to balance its next budget will be an election-defining opportunity for the opposition.

The speech also highlighted the government's record on jobs and the economy and contained many familiar references to long-standing government priorities, as it was intended to help refocus the attention of the media and legislative observers back on the government's delivery of signature commitments. All legislation introduced in the previous session of Parliament will be re-introduced, although some signature pieces (most notably the government's ever-evolving political fundraising legislation) are expected to return in a modified form.

As much as the government is seeking to revitalize its political fortunes with these new announcements, there remains a steady determination from the Premier and her government to deliver on their ambitious agenda. Supported by a refreshed Cabinet, the Premier appears focused on implementing and delivering on several defining priorities:

- Job creation and economic growth;
- Election finance legislation;
- Infrastructure investment, particularly transit;
- Climate change through the Climate Change Action Plan;
- Tuition relief through the Ontario Student Grant; and
- Health and education reform

A renewed emphasis on these priorities is characteristic of the Premier's approach to governance and leadership. She's committed to delivering on transformative change, and her team remains confident that Ontarians will make their choice in the next election based on which party (and leader) is most capable of demonstrating broad-based success on big economic, social and fiscal priorities. Whether today's speech succeeds in revitalizing the government's fortunes and putting it on course for a successful year will be a subject of intense reflection over the months ahead.