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JOHN YAKABUSKI, M.P.P. - RENFREW-NIPISSING-PEMBROKE

Legislative Debate

April 9, 2008

Ontario Health Premium

Mr. John Yakabuski: It's my pleasure to join this debate on the substantive motion on the government's promise to review the health tax that they so illegally instituted in 2004.

Mrs. Carol Mitchell: Promises made; promises kept.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I hear the member for Huron-Bruce say, "Promise made, promise kept." Oh, what a perfect segue: "promise made." That is, in fact, the issue here. It's about the credibility and the dependability of the word of the current Premier. When he was the opposition leader, running to be the Premier, he insisted over and over and over again—in fact, he made a big deal about signing the pledge. When I was a kid, when you got confirmed, you had to take the pledge that you wouldn't drink until you were legally able.

Hon. Jim Watson: Did you sign that pledge?

Mr. John Yakabuski: I'm not sure about that, but I do know this: The Premier wilfully and gleefully—he kind of smirked when he signed it—said, "I, Dalton McGuinty, do solemnly swear," blah-blah-blah, "that I will not raise your taxes." He repeated that over and over again. This was during the campaign. Then, subsequent to the election, let's just look at some of the things that the Premier said. I've got some of these quotes here.

First of all, when he got elected, he insisted that—

Interjection.

Mr. John Yakabuski: No, that's good. We're good with that.

October 30, 2003: "The McGuinty government ... will ... maintain personal income tax rates."

"I won't lower your taxes, but I won't raise them either." You remember him saying that.

Prior to that, on September 22, just prior to the election, he said, "Taxes paid by individuals and small businesses will be the same as they are today if the Ontario Liberals form the next government." He did that in response to a question saying, "But, Premier, there seems to be some speculation and a possibility that the budget of the province of Ontario could be in a deficit to the tune of \$4.5 billion or more." He basically said, "That doesn't matter. Regardless of what the circumstances are, when we inherit the government, I will not be raising your taxes."

So on October 30, he talked about maintaining personal income tax rates. Just two days after that, on November 1, he said, "We will not be raising taxes." He said that on Focus Ontario. You know, it's sort of like, when you try to pull a fast one once, somebody might say, "Oh, he's a bit mischievous, a bit of a trickster." But when it becomes a pattern and it's over and over and over again, then the word "pathological" comes to mind.

Three weeks after that, his throne speech contained this statement:

"... this government made a commitment to maintain personal income tax rates at the current level.

"Legislation will be introduced to keep that commitment."

So now we're almost up to Christmastime.

He followed this up with, in the Sudbury Star the following day, "We are not going to raise taxes. That's just not on the table."

And this in Hansard, November 24, 2003: "We are going to maintain personal income tax rates."

He specifically dismissed the idea of tax increases as a tool to deal with the deficit during question period on December 17 that year. That was the day that the government released its economic statement on the province's finances. Hansard, December 17: "I just don't believe that Ontario families should have to pay the price.... I'm not prepared to encumber them with further taxes."

On and on it continued right up until April 24, just a couple of weeks before the budget, under continuing question, amid the speculation that he might raise taxes. Focus Ontario, April 24: "Well, what we've said all along, I am very clear about this, is that we're not going to be raising taxes."

Three weeks later on May 18, 2004: The infamous budget in which Dalton McGuinty brought forth the largest tax increase in the history of the province of Ontario. He instituted a tax increase, a health care tax of up to \$900 a person.

Originally, they denied that it was a tax. First of all, we have gone through this and, as I say, the word "pathological" comes to mind. So, on and on and on we heard about this, that he wouldn't do the exact thing that he did in May 2004.

When somebody says over and over and over-they don't say it once; it can't be dismissed as, oh, maybe they weren't thinking or they just didn't understand the question, but they say it over and over and over again-"I won't raise your taxes," a pattern has been established.

You would think that someone would care enough about their own credibility that if they thought they were going to do the exact opposite, they would have somehow changed their story. But no, no, right up until the 11th hour, right up until the hangman was there to pull the lever on the gallows, he insisted that he wouldn't be raising taxes. Then they did exactly that.

Then they compounded the problem because they insisted: "No, no, no. This is not a tax; it's a premium." Well, you know that if you pay premiums, when you do your income tax at the end of the year, you can claim premiums and get a deduction and have your taxes reduced because you've paid premiums. Some of them are tax deductible, some of them are not, but for the most part you can actually claim them. This is not a premium, as we know, because at the end of the year you actually were hit with an additional tax. It's an unfair and regressive way that they did it. First of all, it's the diabolical way that they instituted it, and then it is so unfair because of the fact that the higher your income, the less you actually pay as a percentage of your income in health tax. So it's the low-income people and the middle-income people who are actually hurt the worst.

The Liberals talk about their principles and how they care about the working man and the below-average income earners and people like that, and then they do this exact thing.

I have to be careful in the way I choose my words here, but it's the way in which they instituted the tax that is the real crime here. In some societies, if somebody did that so many times over and over again, they would be guilty of a crime.

What happens here too is they're not only paying the health care tax once. Hard-working Ontarians are also finding that they're paying it twice. Once isn't enough for Dalton McGuinty. No, no; you've got to get it twice. It was so ill-considered and it was so ill-conceived that they didn't realize that all of these collective agreements out there, these workers who have negotiated collective agreements with their employees-many of them public sector employers such as the cities of Toronto, Ottawa and London-they've lost court cases now, which says that they, as the employer, have to pay the health care tax. But what does that mean? It's not that the city of Ottawa or London or Toronto is paying that tax; it's the people whom the cities get their revenue from who are paying that tax. So those taxpayers are getting hit twice: once when they pay their own income taxes at the end of the fiscal year and also on their property taxes, because these cities are now paying for the health premium that the people under their employ pay. So they have to pay it not

once, in Dalton McGuinty's Ontario, but twice. I'm sure that if those Liberals could find a way to charge them a third time, they'd be doing it.

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The other thing that bothers me about this whole motion-and I sometimes have to wonder why we're here-is that the outcome has already been determined. He's not interested in debating. He's not even looking for ways to fix the problems with the health care tax. There are all kinds of things that were either unintended, possibly-I might even give them a bit of the benefit of the doubt there-or certainly unexpected consequences of this tax. But they're not interested in making any kind of changes or amendments so that this ill-conceived and illegal tax would actually work in a fairer way. They're not looking at making any changes.

Dalton McGuinty has said, first of all-do you know why he's doing this? He's doing it because he's mandated by law for us to have this debate. He's not doing it because he wants to see whether there's a way that we can make things better. He's not doing it because there might be a way that we can make this fairer for lower-income people, because if you're making \$1 million, you're still only paying \$900 for this health tax. If you're making about \$60,000, you're paying \$900 for this health tax. So how is that fair? But he's not interested in looking at that and seeing if there are ways that we can change this to be fair. He's not looking at that. Here's what he said: "We're mandated by law to review the health tax and we will do that." The champion, the Guinness World Records book record-holder of all time for broken promises, wants to keep one, so he's going to make sure we have this debate. "We're mandated by law to review this health tax and we will do that." But he says, "I made it very clear before the campaign and during the campaign what my view is." He continued, "We're only doing this because we're obligated to do so." And finally, "I think the outcome is pretty predictable."

If you have no intention of trying to improve something, no intention of looking for ways that you can be fairer by the mistakes that you have made, then what is the point of going through this exercise? Just filling time in the Ontario Legislative Assembly? I think there should be other things to be talking about, but if you're really seriously looking to make this place better and to make Ontario better for the people who live here, particularly those who are struggling under the Dalton McGuinty tax-and-spend regime, then maybe we can make this debate worthwhile and meaningful.

Let's talk a little bit about health care. I heard the member from Sault Ste. Marie go on and on and on about what he perceived as the improvements to health care under the McGuinty Liberals. But if you ask the people in Ontario where they see the health system in this province, they don't agree with him. They see longer lineups in emergency rooms; they see more and more people who can't get a bed in a long-term-care centre and are on waiting lists that never seem to get shorter, only longer; they see more people looking for a family doctor-and no help and no solutions coming from the provincial government.

When they instituted this tax, they promised that every single penny would go to health care in this province. We know that's not the case. They even had to admit that they were putting it into sewer pipes and other infrastructure projects in the initial stages, and now it's just gone into general revenue.

Hon. David Caplan: Look at Barry's Bay.

Mr. John Yakabuski: I hear the Minister of Public Infrastructure Renewal heckling me over there, as he likes to do from time to time. Infrastructure is important, but I think there's room to be honest about where you're spending your money and how you're spending it. You don't tell somebody that it's going here when it's going there. This is not about whether the priorities have to be met-of course they do-but I think there's room for the people in Ontario to get straight answers from their government regardless of what party forms that government. That should be expected of every government, in the province of Ontario or anywhere else. In a democracy we expect our governments to give us the straight goods, not to tell us, "We're going to put the money here," and then put it there. That's not too much to expect. I know the Minister of Public Infrastructure Renewal would agree with me on that point. We don't always agree, but I'm sure we would on that one.

By the way, we are very pleased with the assistance that was given to my community in Madawaska Valley to ensure that a new waste water treatment plant could be built. We do appreciate that.

Hon. David Caplan: Which is a health issue.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Absolutely. Yes, it certainly is.

I wanted to talk about some of the issues that they say have been addressed in health care. I started to, and then we got onto the sewer pipe because the minister wanted to talk about sewers. More people in this province are looking for a family doctor. There was a big story in the Ottawa Citizen-front page-last Saturday about the number of people who can't get a family doctor in eastern Ontario; about the community of Eganville and the efforts they have gone to to secure a family doctor. They've got the building, they've got the office, they're ready to go, but they can't get the help from the McGuinty government.

The McGuinty government now has become fixated on family health teams, which is an idea they stole from the previous government, but they don't want to finance the kinds of projects that some of the smaller communities need to bring a doctor to their community. Some doctors don't want to work for a fee for service; they want to work as a salaried employee of the community health centre. But they don't want to support those any more, and that's a real challenge for people in rural Ontario communities. I think that people in rural Ontario have the same rights to a family doctor as anywhere else. This government, I do believe, is failing in that regard.

I heard the member from Sault Ste. Marie talking about the medical school up in Thunder Bay. Well, it was the Harris government that approved that and got the ball rolling, and they know it. They simply want to take credit for it. The fact is that that started with the Harris government, and-

Interjections.

Mr. John Yakabuski: -the people on this side of the House are simply not going to let those people on the government side take credit for the good initiatives, the good ideas and the important things that were done to ensure that doctors would be taught and built here in the province of Ontario so that we could address the challenges of the years ahead. This government today doesn't want to give any credit to the previous government-and there are so many places where we could talk about that.

The one thing we never forgot in that government was that your word is your bond. When you tell somebody you're going to do it, there's a tremendous expectation that that's exactly what you're going to do. In the