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

Oral Questions

February 24, 2009

Energy Rates

Question 1

Mr. John Yakabuski: My question is for the Premier. The proposed Green Energy Act raises an alarming number of questions. During these times of economic downturn, when everyone is counting their pennies, Ontarians want to know how much more they're going to have to pay to heat their homes and keep the lights on under this new legislation. Can you tell us that, Premier?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: I'm very pleased to take this question and I'm very much looking forward to having the opportunity to hear debates in this Legislature and to create opportunities for the public to speak to this as well.

We are very pleased and proud to be able to introduce the bill, as we did yesterday. It is going to enable us to create new, clean, green jobs, it's going to enable us to generate clean, green electricity and it's going to enable more of us to do our part in the fight against climate change. So I really think it is the sweet spot of sweet spots.

The price of electricity from wind is higher than it is from dirty coal. The price of electricity from the sun, harnessing that power, is more expensive than dirty, fired coal. Those are true. But on the other side, there's also a very important aspect to our new legislation, which is going to ensure that we have more energy conservation to keep our bills down.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mr. John Yakabuski: I didn't get the answer there. Yesterday, the Minister of Energy indicated that there would essentially be no increase as a result of this bill. He said, "One per cent per year for the next three years." If the minister thinks he can fool Ontarians with this sleight of hand, he's dead wrong. Yesterday he said there would be an initial increased investment of \$5 billion. When that amount is paid-and that's just for the transmission upgrades they're talking about-by 4.2 million electricity consumers, that calculates out to an extra \$1,200 per customer. Spread out over three years, that's a 30% increase, Minister, not a 1% increase.

Premier, explain to this House how you can promise a 1% increase by your own figures when the increase to consumers will be at least 30%.

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: My honourable colleague is engaging in all kinds of speculation. I'll tell you where he's on to something. My honourable colleague has said that he and his wife, along with their children, embarked on a program to conserve energy in their own home. They reduced the usage in their home by 40%. I want to commend him for that.

What we need to do and what we will continue to do is find more ways for more Ontarians, whether inside our schools, our hospitals, our industries or our homes, to use less electricity. At the end of the day, what is really important to Ontarians is their bill. We're going to do everything we can to create more opportunities for more Ontarians to keep that bill down and, ideally, like my honourable colleague, get it even lower.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary?

Mr. John Yakabuski: I accept your unsolicited compliments. What I'd really like are some clear answers.

Ontarians were not fooled when Stéphane Dion tried to tell them that his Green Shift plan wasn't going to cost them a thing, and they're not going to be fooled by your plan. Yesterday, the minister held up Germany as a model. Well, the price of electricity in Germany is north of 22 cents a kilowatt hour. That's at least three times, three and a half times, the rate of electricity here, Mr. Premier. How can you stand there and tell Ontarians that their energy bills are not going to go up by more than a single percentage point per year? In fact, they're going through the roof. That's what's going to happen. It's time that you came clean.

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: I gather from this line of questioning-I hope this is not true, but notwithstanding the international praise that this bill has already garnered, and the fact that it's going to create some 50,000 jobs and is going to ensure that we can have energy conservation proceed in a very aggressive way, it would appear that the regressive Conservative Party is not standing ready to support this bill. That is unfortunate.

The point I want to make is that there's a difference between our electricity rates and our electricity bills. It's interesting that my honourable colleague talked about electricity rates in Germany, but he didn't talk about their home electricity bills. I think if he checks their home electricity bills and the way they practise energy conservation, then we'll have something that we can honestly compare between their bills and our bills.

Question 2

Energy Rates

Mr. John Yakabuski: I don't think everybody's packing up and leaving for Germany, Mr. Premier.

Nobody is buying your argument about the balance and the costs. After Ontarians are done paying for skyrocketing energy costs they won't have the money to pay for anything else, especially that refrigerator you've been telling them to buy. Just like your federal Liberal colleague Stéphane Dion, you're not being straight with Ontarians who are worried about paying their mortgages and hanging on to their jobs. Will you have the decency to lay out the real facts and tell Ontarians that, when they can least afford it, this bill is going to mean significantly higher energy costs for homeowners and consumers in this province? Will you come straight, Mr. Premier?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: To the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure.

Hon. George Smitherman: I do want to thank the honourable member for his question and I do want to thank him as well for his comments in the Legislature yesterday, when he gave very strong evidence for the opportunity that individuals have in their own homes to impact the amount of energy that they use. I think that's what the Green Energy Act is all about: the opportunity for us to engage individually in activities that help to lessen our impact on the climate and to have the opportunity to create a green economy at the same time.

I think it is very important to note that when you make an investment, a necessary investment, as an example, in transmission capability-I spoke yesterday of a \$5-billion incremental investment-this is about an investment in a piece of infrastructure that doesn't last for just one year or two years. It's about investing in our fundamental infrastructure, which of course is paid off over a period of time. This is why we predict that the incremental costs associated with the Green Energy Act-

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Supplementary?

Mr. John Yakabuski: We're going to hear that talking around the issue over and over and over again. But I'm going to make that point again, Mr. Premier: When people in this province are done paying for the things that they have no choice in paying-their mortgages, their food, their housing, their clothing and the electricity under this government-they're not going to have much left for anything else. They do need to know, going forward, what electricity is going to cost, not some vague thoughts about how we're going to do this or that. They need to know what the cost of electricity is going to be in the province of Ontario for consumers, for families, seniors, low-income people; people like that who can hardly afford the electricity bills they're paying now. What is it going to mean to them going forward?

Hon. George Smitherman: Ontarians aren't going to get very much value from the conversation if the honourable member is not able to understand that investments in infrastructure, where the infrastructure lasts 40, 50, 60 or 70 years-if he tries to pretend that it's all about paying for those in the first and second year, if he doesn't understand the fundamental investment in infrastructure, then we're going to have a challenge. The investments in Ontario's infrastructure, to build more renewable capacity by investing in transmission and distributed generation, are going to cost 1% a year incremental on Ontario's hydro bills, but what they will provide is the opportunity for 50,000 new jobs in the green economy, and it will provide for Ontarians to use less electricity as individuals. The honourable member has given strong testimony to that ability by saying that he and his family reduced their own energy use by 40%.

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The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Final supplementary?

Mr. John Yakabuski: Minister, it appears that the government doesn't really want people to take a good look at this bill. They want to move it ahead. That's surprising. We're looking for a better opportunity for people in the province of Ontario. That's exactly what the former Minister of Energy, currently the Minister of Finance, did with Bill 100. He sent it to committee after first reading. This bill is more complicated, more complex and broader-reaching than Bill 100.

We're asking you to follow the precedent set by your own government. Allow this bill to go out to committee after first reading so that stakeholders, consumers and, indeed, ordinary citizens across this province have a chance to comment on this bill before it goes further.

Hon. George Smitherman: I do apologize to the honourable member if the matter at hand has caught him off guard and it's too complex for him to be able to participate in the legislative debate, but we do think that it sends an important signal to the people in the province of Ontario-

Interjections.

Hon. George Smitherman: Mr. Speaker-

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): The member for Niagara West will withdraw his comment.

Mr. Tim Hudak: Withdrawn.

Hon. George Smitherman: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

We will be very happy this afternoon to see the opportunity for members of the Legislature to debate one of the most important matters of public policy and to debate a matter that promises 50,000 additional jobs. That will begin this afternoon. Of course, the

bill will go to committee, and we look forward to all opportunities to improve upon the legislation as we've brought it forward today through the debating offers from the honourable members opposite.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): New question?

Mr. John Yakabuski: What you've promised in a bill and what you've delivered in the past for many of your promises-

Question 5

Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation

Mr. John Yakabuski: To the Minister of Energy: Minister, this bill is not only unclear about what it's going to do, but you've been unclear in your explanation of it.

When the former Minister of Energy introduced Bill 100, he recognized its complexity and the broad reach with which it covered the province of Ontario and all stakeholders and consumers. I'm asking you again: Will you give the most important people in the province, the people who are going to be affected by this bill-not the members of this Legislature, but the people of this province and the manufacturers and the stakeholders in this province-the opportunity to speak to this bill before second reading, like your predecessor did with Bill 100?

Hon. George Smitherman: Now, the honourable member, because the bill is big and the bill is complex, throws up his hands and he says, "I, from Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke, a representative of the people am not ready to participate in a debate about an important matter at hand." We have brought this forward for this debate in the Legislature of Ontario, where the peoples' representatives reside, and as part of that process, of course, the bill will go to committee. But this afternoon, here, representing an important piece of legislation, we'll come forward for discussion, and we see-

Interjections.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Ten seconds.

Hon. George Smitherman: We see the official opposition unable to muster a coherent policy, throwing up their hands and saying, "We don't want to participate in the debate."

The debate begins this afternoon.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary.

Mr. John Yakabuski: Perhaps the minister needed to take a breath.

Minister, you said yourself yesterday that generation isn't going to roll out of this bill for some time. We have some time to get it right. Your predecessor did his best to get it right by giving the people of this province the opportunity to speak to the legislation. Before it gets rammed through the House on second reading within the next few days-as you've said yourself, this is the most important piece of energy legislation, perhaps, in this province's history. Does that not imply that the people who are most affected by it should have a good opportunity, a fulsome opportunity, to bring their views to bear to committee on this bill?

Hon. George Smitherman: In the election of October 2007, I stood before the people of Toronto Centre and said, "Elect me as your representative for the important debates that take place in the Legislature of Ontario." I was lucky enough that they did, and I joined other colleagues.

Today, we fulfill our responsibilities with a piece of legislation, and the official opposition does not stand and say, "We have issues on this point of content or that"; they stand and say, "On matters of process, we throw up our hands, and we are not ready to participate in the debate."

The debate begins this afternoon with second reading. The bill will be improved through a legislative process that will include committee hearings. We look forward to hearing on this important subject from all members, and we especially look forward to a coherent position from the official opposition.

Question 8 - Elizabeth Witmer

Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation

Mrs. Elizabeth Witmer: My question is for the Premier. Premier, you've just heard the exchange between your Minister of Energy and Infrastructure and our critic for energy and infrastructure. I think you also know that you in government have had months and months to prepare for the introduction of this bill yesterday, whereas we in opposition only saw the bill for the first time yesterday. We haven't even had an opportunity to caucus it.

I would say to you: The question that was asked by my colleague is based on a precedent that was set by your own government, where a bill went to committee after first reading. We are asking for an opportunity for MPPs and the public to familiarize themselves with the bill. I ask you, Premier, do you think the response of your minister of the crown was-

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Thank you. Premier?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: I'll tell you why I can't agree with my honourable colleagues opposite. I think we've done about as much as we can possibly do to ensure that people

had a good heads-up in terms of where we're going to go on this. The bill is being posted to the Environmental Bill of Rights website for public comment. There will be committee hearings. We will fully respect the process. There will be ample opportunity for debate here and for debate during the course of committee, and we would welcome input from Ontarians.

I would be surprised-and I've already chatted with the minister about this-if there weren't one or more amendments we need to make in order to further improve the quality of the bill itself.

I must also say, time is of the essence. This economy is struggling. We want to create 50,000 new, clean, green jobs. We want to get our hands on clean electricity. We want to do more to fight climate change. So we're moving ahead, but we'll respect the process.

The Speaker (Hon. Steve Peters): Supplementary?

Mrs. Elizabeth Witmer: Premier, what we're saying to you is, we recognize too that this is a very important bill for the public. We want to make sure that the public and the stakeholders, who obviously have a keen interest in this legislation, have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the bill, an opportunity that you and your members have had for months and months and months. If we are to have a substantive debate on second reading, we are asking you to allow time to send it out and get the feedback from the public in order to ensure that this bill, when it is finally passed, will indeed address the concerns and be the best it possibly can be. Will you agree to send it out after first reading?

Hon. Dalton McGuinty: I want to say again that we intend to respect the process. There will be debate in this House. There will be committee hearings. We're going beyond that; we're posting this on the website of the Environmental Bill of Rights.

I want to remind my colleagues that many of the important elements found in our new Green Energy Act were found in their own platform in the 2007 campaign.

This is a very important piece of public policy; we agree on that. We think that time is of the essence. We need to get going with this. We need to do more to get clean electricity. We need to do more in the fight against climate change. We need to do more to create jobs for Ontario families.

We will respect the process and we'll move forward at the same time.

