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

Response to Ministerial Statement

February 23, 2009

Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation

Mr. John Yakabuski: It's my pleasure to respond to the minister. I must commend him on his choice of neckties today. I searched through my closet, but the only green tie I could find was one with shamrocks on it. I just didn't think it would fly.

Anyhow, he did say to me the other day, "You know, Yak, there are things in this bill you're going to like more than others," and he's absolutely right about that.

The environment has no greater friends in this Legislature than the members of the PC Party. I'll give you a couple of examples. Lands for Life, which was brought in by the previous government, was the biggest set-aside of protected lands in the history of this province; also the Smart Growth initiative that the current government borrowed much of when it came out with its current growth plan.

But the act that he is presenting today leaves us with a whole lot more questions than it does answers. The act is vague in many ways, and in the briefing that I had earlier today from ministry staff, they conceded that there are so many things yet to be determined through consultations with the OPA and other groups. As I said, there are so many questions about what this act will actually do. In fact, as the minister showed—he even gave me a CD today—there are no less than 15 statutes and acts that this act being presented today will actually amend here in the province of Ontario. So it's a very broad and far-reaching act, but we're getting very little information about what it will actually directly do.

One of the questions that people ask, and one of the questions I hear when we're out—this has been in the news because the minister has been out on a pre-selling tour this last little while with his supporters about this act. One of the questions we're getting is: "What will it actually mean to the ultimate price of electricity?" One thing about our economy here in the province of Ontario, and indeed the tremendous standard of living that we have enjoyed for decades: It has been built on access to reliable, abundant, affordable electricity. So there are some questions as to what this act will actually mean to the price of electricity. I know the Premier is talking about 50,000 new green jobs as a result of it, and he talks about some of them being in the manufacturing sector. The manufacturing sector is one of the ones that is most affected by the price of electricity, and indeed the forestry sector as well.

The other group of people who are most affected by the price of electricity, and the minister knows this, are the people who are in the lowest level of incomes. If you're making a six-figure salary, the price of electricity is a relatively small part of your budget. But with the things that you cannot eliminate from your budget, such as food and housing and clothing, if you are a low-income resident of the province of Ontario, that electricity component of the bill is indeed significant, and we need to have some answers as to how this is going to be affected by this initiative.

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There's no question that conservation is important. No watt, no kilowatt, no megawatt, should ever be wasted. I can tell the minister, and I've told his predecessor, that several years ago my wife and I, along with our children, embarked on a program to conserve energy in our own home. We reduced our usage in our home by 40%, but over the last few years that has kind of leveled off, so we haven't done much better over the last couple of years. But we did do a pretty darned good job between 2003 and 2005 in making the changes in our home to reduce our usage of electricity. I think that is an important thing, and I think there are some gains to be made out there today in that part of this act.

The conservation part of this act, I think, is a little easier to understand than some of the things such as the feed-in tariffs that the minister is talking about, which indeed will offer incentives to produce new, green, renewable power. I think the people in the province of Ontario have a right to know what those incentives are going to be and how much they're going to be. For example, in the latest RES III buy-ins that you recently awarded 492 megawatts of wind, there has been no release of even the average price that you paid in that, which is unusual, given that those average prices were released on the earlier renewable energy standard offers that were awarded in the province of Ontario. So there are issues to be asked about.

The minister talks about and the Premier talked about the municipal component and how they're going to remove some of that red tape. Well, this is the government that has instituted more red tape in the last five years than any government before them. So we do have to see how that's going to roll out.

We will have a chance to debate this further in the House-