



## Upcoming fall session at Queens Park by: Darryl Wolk

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### **Preview of the Upcoming Fall Session at Queen's Park**

The last session was a tough session for the McGuinty government. Two Ministers were implicated in the Rudy Dhalla “nanny gate” scandal, but survived when the smoke cleared. David Caplan found himself under fire with the e-health scandal that dominated Question Period prior to Queen’s Park going on summer recess. A budget during difficult economic times resulted in an \$18.5 billion deficit and forced the government to announce a harmonized sales tax with the federal government that will raise sales taxes 8% on many goods and services not previously covered by the current PST. There were some grumblings that some Liberal backbenchers were not happy with the budget and pushed back in caucus. Michael Bryant left Cabinet for an economic development job in Toronto. Rumours persist that George Smitherman is considering leaving provincial politics to run for mayor of Toronto at the very time the media is reporting a potential rift between David Miller and the Premier. Many pundits interpreted Smitherman’s garbage pick-up in his riding as a sign he is interested in the Toronto mayor race in 2010. There were also the auto bailouts that were but generally unpopular among those not employed by the auto sector and may prove to be of questionable economic benefit. The Green Energy Act (and also McGuinty’s recent electric car announcement) did not go over as well with the media and pundits and Liberals expected. Nuclear projects were scrapped due to costs while wind and solar projects faced local opposition. Metrolinx tossed politicians off its board offending some politicians in the GTA including David Miller. Economic stimulus and matching projects with federal and local governments were important as Ontario took a major economic hit particularly in the manufacturing sector and suffered a serious recession resulting in thousands of jobs lost across the province. Economic realities resulted in less government revenue, more spending and because of this, many priorities such as poverty or closing coal fired power plants were either scaled back or put on hold. At the same time, the two Ontario opposition parties were largely ineffective due to both the Ontario NDP and the Ontario PC Party being focused on internal leadership races. Heading into the fall session, Dalton McGuinty could face some real opposition.

Despite many difficult decisions made by Dalton McGuinty since coming to office, his poll numbers have not changed for the worse since 2007 when he was re-elected. According to a July 21-23 Ipsos-Reid poll, 44% of respondents said the Liberal government under McGuinty has done a good job and deserves to be re-elected. 49% want another party to take over, but that figure would be split between NDP and PC voters. In terms of voting intentions, 45% would vote Liberal (a majority government), 31% would vote for the PC Party under new leader Tim Hudak, and 12% would vote NDP under new leader Andrea Horwath. The Ontario Green Party (currently without a leader or seat in the Legislature) would take in 11% of the vote making them statistically tied with the NDP due to the margin of error. These numbers have not moved in a significant way from previous polls where the NDP and PC Party did not have a leader (John Tory was defeated in a by-election and did not have a seat leading to his resignation) Howard Hampton at the time was NDP leader while the NDP was in the process of selecting a new leader) signaling that neither Horwath nor Hudak has at this point not been able to provide a bounce for their respected parties. Based on federal



poll numbers showing the Liberals and Conservatives are basically running neck and neck in Ontario and also the state of the economy, these numbers for McGuinty are a surprise to some pundits who expected he would be less popular than polling currently shows.

The summer offers an opportunity for both Tim Hudak and Andrea Horwath to raise their profiles and find their footing on the issues that they plan to attack the government with in the upcoming fall session. Various internal issues in both parties have been resolved. A new NDP and PC shadow cabinets have been announced and following the last session Dalton McGuinty shuffled his cabinet. Below is an analysis of how some of the changes could impact the important portfolios at Queens Park:

### **Leadership**

The resignation of Michael Bryant and the rumoured departure of George Smitherman could be an indication that Dalton McGuinty plans to run in the next election for a third term. At this point it seems his leadership is safe and he will continue to lead the Ontario Liberals down the same path as previous sessions. While there may be some potential threats to his popularity, at this point he is ahead in the polls and will likely stay the course.

On the PC side, expect a big change in the Party this fall. In June, Tim Hudak was elected Leader signaling the party membership is ready to move further to the right. Prior to Hudak's victory, the party had a Leader outside the legislature in John Tory and was divided between "Red Tories" and those who wanted to return to a formula similar to Mike Harris' "Common Sense Revolution" and the federal Conservative Party. Christine Elliott ran as a "Red Tory" and was defeated by Hudak with the second ballot support of Randy Hillier. The change in leadership will likely mean that the PC Party will be much closer to what we saw under Mike Harris' leadership as opposed to the "moderate" conservatism of John Tory and Christine Elliott. While Tim Hudak may face less internal division, it is fair to say that he risks being seen as "another Mike Harris" by the media, labour groups and swing voters. He must now strike a balance between his own supporters who want to move the party to the right and the need to build a broad coalition that can win a majority government in 2011. He hopes that his youth and energy allow him to rebuild the party and prepare it for the 2011 election.

The NDP is fighting for relevance. In the recent Ipsos-Reid poll, it is statistically tied with the Green Party. Liberals have been strong on both poverty and the environment marginalizing the NDP to the far left. The recession forces the NDP to prove to Ontarians that it can be trusted managing the economy, an area not seen as their traditional strength. While some NDP critics served in government under Bob Rae, it has been a long time in the political wilderness for most of the NDP caucus. Andrea Horwath presents a new face, image and a female voice for the NDP. She offers a different style than Howard Hampton or Jack Layton at the federal level, but so far has not generated much profile outside political circles. The NDP has a long way to go if it wants to return to government and not be seen as a "union friendly" or "token opposition" party.

### **Health and Long Term Care:**

At the end of the last session in the legislature both the NDP and PC Party were calling for the resignation of Health and Long Term Care Minister David Caplan due to the e-Health scandal. Since the last session, executives have been removed and a new interim CEO has been appointed. Nonetheless it appears that the scandal is larger than first thought and inexplicably the government fired PriceWaterhouseCoopers who had been retained to review policies and practices at



eHealth.. Following a cabinet shuffle, David Caplan retained his portfolio. Heading into the fall session, experienced and respected MPP France Gelinas will continue to hold the government to account on behalf of the NDP. On the PC side, there will be a major change. Tim Hudak has appointed Christine Elliott (wife of federal finance minister Jim Flaherty) as Deputy Leader and Health critic. Previously former Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer held the portfolio. Christine Elliott will now be the point person on the e-Health scandal for the PC Party and should come with increased profile in the position. The portfolio will be important as several important bills will be debated and voted on in the fall session including Bill 179 dealing with the increased scopes of practice for a variety of health professions and major changes to the Regulated Health Professions Act. Barring unforeseen circumstances, this is likely to be the last major health legislation tabled in the Legislature before the next election.

### **Finance and Revenue:**

Dwight Duncan retained the Finance portfolio following the recent cabinet shuffle. He will continue to be the government point person on the province's finances and management of the economy. There was a significant change regarding the Harmonized Sales Tax however. John Wilkinson has now moved into a new position as Minister of Revenue. Wilkinson will now speak for the government on the controversial HST file. On the NDP side, former leadership candidate Michael Prue will hold the government to account on both the economy and the HST as critic for both Revenue and Finance. The PC Party will bring fresh blood to the finance and revenue critic roles. Norm Miller (son of former Ontario Premier Frank Miller) takes over the finance portfolio under Tim Hudak. First elected in 2001, this will be his first time in an economic portfolio. It is expected however, that in reality Hudak himself will be the Opposition's de facto Finance critic. In Revenue, youngest MPP Lisa MacLeod will lead the PC Party opposing the HST. Opposing and stopping the HST was a central campaign promise of Tim Hudak during his leadership campaign and has been a focus of his social media efforts. The NDP has also been hammering the government on the issue. Wilkinson will be eager to prove himself by selling the HST due to take effect in July 2010. "Insiders" have said that the Premier was not fully satisfied with how Dwight Duncan sold the harmonized sales tax following the last budget. Other key players in economic portfolios include Windsor MPP Sandra Pupatello who picked up Michael Bryant's responsibilities in Economic Development and Trade to add to her existing International Trade portfolio. She will face off against former NDP leader Howard Hampton and Thornhill PC MPP Peter Shurman who is considered a strong performer within the PC caucus and is a former CFRB radio talk show host and businessman.

### **Energy and Infrastructure:**

George Smitherman is currently the Deputy Premier and is responsible for Energy and Infrastructure in the McGuinty Cabinet. Energy is a hot issue with the Green Energy Act; a series of wind, solar and peaker power plant issues in various communities; a promise to shut down coal power plants; and a nuclear plan side-lined because of unexpectedly high costs. PC MPP John Yakabuski, who was first elected in 2003 continues as Opposition Critic for Energy where he will continue attacks on the Green Energy Act and likely McGuinty's incentive for buying electric cars. Environmentalist and former leadership contender Peter Tabuns will lead the NDP on the energy file where the NDP is likely to challenge the Green Party and Liberal Party gains on environmental issues at the expense of the NDP. Tabuns is also the critic for infrastructure renewal. With regards to infrastructure, Frank Klees who is from the riding of Newmarket-Aurora within the GTA will take on that critic role. Klees is also a former transportation Minister and will also be the transportation critic. He is likely to match up well with George Smitherman based on his 14 years of experience at Queen's Park. Frank Klees finished second to Tim Hudak in the Ontario PC leadership race.

### **Labour:**

The Labour file could see some increased interest in the fall session. In May of 2009 opposition parties were calling on Labour Minister Peter Fonseca to resign over the “nanny-gate” scandal involving federal MP Ruby Dhalla. Like David Caplan, he survived the Cabinet shuffle. He will face off against NDP MPP Peter Kormos from Welland. The NDP is considered an ally of labour unions. On the PC side, things might get interesting as former President of the Ontario Landowners Association, leadership candidate and maverick MPP Randy Hillier has been assigned this critic portfolio. After being ejected in the last session, Hillier will attract the interest of media pundits and be a potential target of the Ontario Liberals. This appointment could also indicate that Tim Hudak is serious about his proposal to scrap the Ontario Human Rights Commission that Hillier first championed. The Ontario Human Rights Commission was a central issue in the PC leadership race and could potentially be a lightning rod issue going forward with the general public and during question period at Queen’s Park.

### **Education:**

Under Dalton McGuinty, the education portfolio has largely been quiet compared to the Mike Harris years due to there being little unrest among teachers unions. That could change as collective bargaining agreements expire and new ones need to be negotiated during these uncertain economic times. Kathleen Wynne, who defeated John Tory in the riding of Don Valley West in 2007, retains the Education portfolio. Elizabeth Witmer, who was the former PC Health critic, has now moved into the role of Education critic. She is a solid performer with cabinet experience in both health and education. It will be her role to build bridges with teachers and go after the self proclaimed “education Premier” Dalton McGuinty. Trinity Spadina MPP Rosario Marchese will lead the education file for the NDP.

### **Children and Youth Services**

Not normally a high profile Cabinet position, Children and Youth Services may get some extra attention due to Dalton McGuinty’s ambitious commitment to reduce poverty in Ontario and because the recession will bring further hardships to many Ontarians. Deb Matthews has done well in the portfolio taking the poverty issue away from the NDP and generating good reviews from stakeholders. For this reason, current leader Andrea Horwath has appointed herself critic of Children and Youth services to press McGuinty not to allow the recession to delay or dilute anti-poverty measures promised in the last election campaign. That could be interpreted as a signal of how important the NDP consider this file. In contrast, the PC Party has assigned the Children and Youth Services role to rookie MPP Sylvia Jones from the riding of Dufferin-Caledon. The McGuinty government has placed a high priority on this Ministry and it is quite likely that it will be a continued focus in the upcoming session.



### **Return of the Legislature:**

The Ontario legislature returns from summer recess on **September 14**.

A full parliamentary calendar can be found at this link: [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/go2.jsp?Page=/house-proceedings/supporting-content/files/2009\\_parliamentary\\_calendar&menuItem=dandp\\_proceedings&locale=en](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/go2.jsp?Page=/house-proceedings/supporting-content/files/2009_parliamentary_calendar&menuItem=dandp_proceedings&locale=en)

A complete list of outstanding bills can be found at this link: [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills\\_current.do?locale=en](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills_current.do?locale=en)

A monthly committee schedule can be found at this link: [http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/go.jsp?locale=en&menuItem=committees\\_current&Page=/committee-proceedings/committee-schedules/files\\_html/monthly\\_schedule](http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/go.jsp?locale=en&menuItem=committees_current&Page=/committee-proceedings/committee-schedules/files_html/monthly_schedule)

Ontario Legislature Website: <http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/home.do>

### **Party Websites:**

Ontario Liberals: <http://www.ontarioliberal.ca/>

Ontario PC: <http://www.ontariopc.com/>

Ontario NDP: <http://ontariondp.com/>

Ontario Green Party: <http://www.gpo.ca/>