

Wynne's throne speech promises new spending on health care, home care and child care in Ontario ^[1]

Premier Kathleen Wynne is pressing the reset button — or the panic button. In a speech from the throne Monday, Wynne outlined the Liberal government's agenda leading up to the June 7 election.

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EXCERPTS

Care versus cuts.

That's the message Premier Kathleen Wynne's Liberals will take to voters as the governing party tries to contrast itself against Doug Ford's surging Progressive Conservatives.

In a speech from the throne Monday, Wynne outlined the Liberal government's agenda leading up to the June 7 election, promising new spending on health care, home care, dental care, pharmacare and child care.

With the vote 80 days away — and public opinion polls suggesting the 14-and-a-half-year-old administration may be on its last legs — the premier is promising to expand the new OHIP+ prescription drug program “to include other parts of the population.”

That means if the Liberals are re-elected, the free medications now limited to those 24 years and under would be available to many more Ontarians.

Details will be announced in Finance Minister Charles Sousa's March 28 budget, which will have a deficit as high as \$8 billion.

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As well, there will be measures in the budget to reduce “the cost of child care, which has long been a stumbling block for growing families.”

“At the same time, government programs that are already making it easier for you to care for your loved ones, and help them to succeed, will be expanded. OHIP+, the pharmacare program that is providing free medications for children and youth, will be expanded to include other parts of the population.”

The speech added that “more people without a drug or dental benefits plan will have access to more affordable prescription drugs and dental care.”

That comes as the New Democrats are promising a \$1.2 billion public dental scheme if Horwath becomes premier.

“It's awfully coincidental that they stuck ‘dental’ into their throne speech,” said the NDP leader.

For his part, Ford blasted Wynne for making “commitments on billions in new spending for expensive re-election promises in a desperate attempt to try and save her government.”

“The Liberals are trying to buy votes from a few of us, instead of trying to fix our province for all of us,” said the new Tory leader, who has promised to slash 4 per cent of government spending, which could mean \$5.6 billion in cuts on a \$141 billion annual budget.

But Wynne's government insisted the Liberals offer a stark difference from Ford's vision.

“We care for our families, our neighbours and our province. We see the big picture,” the speech from the throne said.

“Our world is changing in ways we've never seen before and at speeds that make it feel hard to keep up. The cost of living is rising, and at the same time, stable, long-term jobs — jobs that pay a decent wage — are proving harder to find.”

To that end, the Liberals touted their pledge to increase the \$14 an hour minimum wage to \$15 next Jan. 1, mindful that Ford opposes the raise.

The governing party also boasted about Ontario's “cap-and-trade” program with Quebec and California to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

Ford is threatening to withdraw from that accord and opposes the federal government's carbon pricing program.

"These are fights that our children and grandchildren can't afford for us to lose," the throne speech said.

"Ontario eliminated coal-fired power, making our air cleaner and lowering our rates of childhood asthma. But you cannot be serious about lowering emissions and fighting climate change without a price on carbon pollution," it said.

"We joined with Quebec and California in North America's largest carbon market, because this system helps us achieve our ambitious climate change goals, at the lowest cost to people and to businesses," the speech continued.

"And every dollar raised goes to making our province more green with public transit and bike lanes, and helping families and businesses to lower their energy bills and become more energy efficient."

Next week's budget will also make "significant investments" in hospitals to reduce wait times.

The Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) has warned that the sector is "on the brink" of a crisis and has called for an extra \$815 million extra in operating funding to bring its total operating allocation to \$18.8 billion.

Anthony Dale, OHA president, said it appears his organization's concerns have been heard.

A large investment in the sector "will be really helpful for the coming year to help address wait times for patient care," said Dale.

"It is important that we remain focused on building capacity in hospitals and across all health services over the long term," he added.

Child-care advocates were buoyed by the throne speech's references to chronically low wages for early childhood educator and sky-high parent fees.

"We were pleased to see specific mention of early childhood educators and that actions to date to raise wages are just the beginning," said Laurel Rothman of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, who watched the speech from the public gallery. "And we are encouraged child-care affordability will also be addressed."

The coalition's "three big ideas" campaign to transform child care in Ontario, include better working conditions and wages for the child-care workforce; affordable parent fees; and expansion in the public and not-for-profit sector only.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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