



# Ontario Election Countdown Set To Begin Soon

By Allison Jones and Shawn Jeffords

TORONTO: The new year is expected to start the unofficial countdown to Ontario's June election, with key pledges from the governing Liberals kicking in and the Tories working hard to sell their early platform.

Avid political watchers may feel as though the campaign is already in full swing, with the Progressive Conservatives ahead in the polls — already having nominated most of their candidates and releasing their platform more than six months before the vote, and the Liberals flogging their main election message of fairness at every opportunity.

But so far, the majority of Ontarians haven't been paying attention, said University of Toronto political science professor Nelson Wiseman. "I don't think it's on their radar," he said. Most people won't have even noticed the PC platform being released,

he said. "I don't think it matters one iota. Nobody is sitting around leafing through their 78-page program."

That will ramp up in the new year, predicted Premier Kathleen Wynne. "Once there are set election dates in place then everyone knows when the election's going to be, which is the point," she told The Canadian Press. "But it means that there's more strategic positioning that goes on earlier, I would say. Definitely, as we go through the next session when the legislature comes back in February it will definitely (heat up)."

As of Jan. 1, two of the Liberals' major plans, which will form key parts of their re-election bid, come into effect — a \$14-an-hour minimum wage that would rise to \$15 in 2019, and pharmacare for youth under 25 years old.

Those programs are two examples of how the Liberals have been describing their plan as one of fairness and opportunity, a theme that will carry through to

June. "Creating fairness is what I think government exists to do. It's always been at the heart of what I believe about elected office," Wynne said. "Opportunity, when we think about growth and we think about how the economy needs to flourish in Ontario and in Canada, that's about creating opportunity."

Much energy will also be spent in the new year contrasting the parties' plans, Wynne signalled. In the weeks since the PC platform release, the Liberals have already attacked their promises on child care, a carbon tax, mental health funding and a value-for-money audit.

"I think it's only fair to people in the province that they have a sense of what we all stand for," Wynne said. "These next few weeks and months are going to be about yes, making those contrasts, but most importantly, stating emphatically and reinforcing emphatically who we are and what we believe in."

A major factor working against Wynne in the election — along with her dismal approval ratings — will likely be that the Liberals will have been in power for 15 years by the time the vote rolls around.

Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown said by now people know what the Liberals stand for, and he will work to get his message out, continuing to flog his platform around the province as he did late this year in an election-style bus. "I work endless hours and talk at every townhall and every cultural function and every community function I can," he said in an interview. "Certainly we're encouraged by the fact that where we get to know people it's going pretty well for us."

Brown noted that in byelections his party has taken seats away from the Liberals, party membership is up to nearly 200,000 from a low of around 12,000 after the 2014 election, and the PCs have

recently fundraised far larger sums than the Liberals.

One of Brown's biggest challenges remains that polling consistently shows half of Ontarians don't know who he is. The Tories have been trying to combat that with TV ads featuring Brown and having him tour the province.

"I'm just going to be myself," he said. "I think there will be closer scrutiny of the three different political parties and the three leaders as we gear up for the election."

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath said her party will roll out policies over the next several months, acknowledging their underdog status. "People see us as the third party," she said. "We don't have the most seats in the legislature... We have the smallest team, but many people say we punch above our weight. That's because we focus on listening to people and trying to bring forward ideas that will bring forward positive changes in people's lives."

# Environmental Study For Proposed High Speed Rail Corridor

TORONTO: Ontario has issued a Request for Bids (RFB) to develop the environmental assessment terms of reference for the Kitchener-Waterloo to London portion of the corridor.

The terms of reference will provide a framework for planning and the environmental assessment, which will look at how all aspects of the project could affect the environment, including how stations are built, track locations,

energy requirements, expected ridership, and parking needs. As high speed rail will be a new service for Ontario and Canada, new train and safety standards will be developed with Transport Canada to inform the environmental assessment process.

Investing in high speed rail is part of Ontario's plan to create fairness and opportunity during this period of rapid economic change, a press release said.

### QUICK FACTS

- The high speed rail line will serve more than seven million people. The proposed stops are Windsor, Chatham, London, Kitchener-Waterloo, Guelph and Toronto Union Station, with a connection to Pearson International Airport.
- A transportation system that efficiently connects people, places and goods is part of Ontario's plan for the Greater Golden

Horseshoe (GGH) Region. The province is currently seeking input on a draft set of goals and objectives for the GGH Transportation Plan. Take the survey by Dec. 23, 2017.

- Ontario will engage with Indigenous communities, private and public partners, including municipalities, during the environmental assessment, design work and ridership forecasting.
- Ontario launched a web-

site that will be updated as the environmental assessment progresses, including what high speed rail will mean for people in Southwestern Ontario.

- Ontario is making the largest infrastructure investment in hospitals, schools, public transit, roads and bridges in the province's history. To learn more about what's happening in your community, go to Ontario.ca/BuildON.

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