

[Back to Lesson for premier in eHealth: Beware of sages](#)

Lesson for premier in eHealth: Beware of sages

October 09, 2009

Jim Coyle

Greybeards in the political racket are always looking to the past for possible prologue. And not without cause. It is, after all, astonishing in human affairs, and politics in particular, how often what's old becomes new again.

One long-time Pink Palace observer saw a cautionary tale for Premier Dalton McGuinty in the eHealth Ontario boondoggle that's cost taxpayers \$1 billion in an inept bid to establish electronic health records in the province.

"Were you at Queen's Park in '83-84 when the trust scandal turned dorky David Peterson into a man who looked like a premier?" the chap asked.

Well, yes, actually.

That was when Peterson, then an unpromising greenhorn Opposition leader, parlayed public furor over government failure to regulate trust companies engaged in financial manoeuvres worthy of Cirque de Soleil into the first step on his road to the premier's office.

Not so many weeks ago, newly elected (and mildly dorky) PC Leader Tim Hudak might have seemed as unlikely now as Peterson was then to win government.

But it's not out of the question that public disgust with the waste, arrogance and incompetence at eHealth could do for him what the trust company affair helped do for Peterson.

That's just one potential lesson for the premier.

A second – on the nature of governance – was nicely served up yesterday by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union in a warning against a trend to which McGuinty has become an adherent.

"Let's hope the premier and his government learned a valuable lesson," said OPSEU president Warren Thomas. "The more you hand over control of a vital public service like health care to the private sector, the more costs are going to skyrocket at the expense of the taxpayer."

One of the things Auditor General Jim McCarter highlighted was the near total reliance on outside consultants at eHealth. By 2008, the eHealth Program Branch had almost 300 consultants compared to fewer than 30 full-time employees.

"Relying too heavily on consultants can be costly," he said. "Consultants are generally a lot more expensive than employees, and when they finish a project, they leave, often taking with them the expertise needed to maintain and operate the system they helped develop."

A third – and perhaps the most significant – lesson for the premier might be found in to whom he has increasingly chosen to grant his trust (and considerable power).

McGuinty is something of a one-man fan club for gurus and geniuses. He's easily smitten by star power, or the last book he read by someone professing to have the Next Big Idea.

McGuinty fell in love, for instance, with academics Richard Florida and Roger Martin and their notions of a creative economy. He's also enthralled by economist Don Drummond of the TD Bank and by that institution's CEO, Ed Clark – who reportedly helped sell McGuinty on a harmonized sales tax.

There's Michael Fullan, the high priest of benchmarks, in education. Just as there was the now deposed Dr. Alan Hudson and Sarah Kramer at eHealth.

Tellingly, McGuinty lamented on Kramer's ouster that he once considered her "indispensable." And woe is the leader who starts deifying mere mortals in such terms.

If Britons were able to oust Winston Churchill right after World War II, it's safe to say there's no such thing as an indispensable human being.

If the premier were to draw from the eHealth experience nothing more than the idea that power and influence are perhaps better placed in the hands of the elected and accountable than with outside sages and savants, his pain might not have been totally in vain.

Jim Coyle's provincial affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.