

OPSEU questions for political party leaders for the 2007 Ontario provincial election

Summer 2007

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union represents 115,000 working Ontarians. We are asking the leaders of all major political parties in Ontario to complete the following questionnaire and return it no later than July 31, 2007. Answers to the questionnaire will be published on the OPSEU web site to help OPSEU members make their own voting decisions on Election Day.

Public services

1. Ambulance services

Every day, ambulances in Ontario arrive on the scene of medical emergencies only to be asked, “What took you so long?” The combination of emergency room backlogs and an aging population has produced unacceptable delays for ambulance service.

- If your party is elected, what will you do to ensure that municipal ambulance services can meet the provincial standard of a 10.04-minute response time for urban centres?

2. Children’s Aid

Under a new “Transformation” project of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, workers at Ontario’s Children’s Aid Societies are about to see an increase in their workloads of 10 to 20 per cent.

- What will you do to ensure that Children’s Aid workers have more, not less, time to spend with the at-risk families they work with?

3. Children’s Treatment

The Children’s Treatment sector, which provides mental health and rehabilitation services to Ontario’s children, is chronically underfunded and financially unstable. Right now, one in five children in Ontario who need these services are on waiting lists, unable to get the help they need. At least 1,600 have been waiting for more than a year.

- What is your strategy for ensuring that children who need treatment get it in a timely manner so that they are not permanently harmed?

4. Community college funding and accountability

Ontario now ranks ninth out of 10 provinces in per-student funding of community colleges. College funding has risen gradually since 2004, but this extra funding has done nothing to improve student-teacher ratios.

- If your party is elected, where will Ontario stand in terms of per-student funding for community colleges at the end of your term?
- What will you do to ensure that college management is held accountable so that the public dollars colleges receive are used to improve education quality?

5. Corporate tax collection and audits

In 2004, Ontario and the federal government signed an agreement to transfer the collection and auditing of Ontario's corporate taxes, currently handled by the Ontario Ministry of Finance, to the Canada Revenue Agency. An Ontario government bill to implement the transfer became law on June 4, 2007.

- If your party is elected, will you halt the uploading of Ontario corporate tax collection and auditing and keep this work inside the Ontario Ministry of Finance? If not, what steps will you take to ensure that Ontario's interests are protected under the new arrangement?

6. Developmental services

Workers who support people with developmental disabilities in Ontario are paid 25-30 per cent less than workers in equivalent positions in health care, education, and municipalities. This has led to a crisis of retention and recruitment in developmental services.

- What is your party's plan to bring the wages of workers in developmental services up to parity with their colleagues in equivalent positions in the public sector?

7. Environmental protection – Ontario Clean Water Agency

In 2005, the government's Water Strategy Expert Panel recommended privatizing the Ontario Clean Water Agency and establishing it as a commercial corporation to provide water services on a contract basis, in competition with for-profit companies. However, as the report recognizes, many of the smaller municipal water systems that OCWA operates cannot be run on a full-cost recovery basis. There will continue to be a need for emergency services, such as those OCWA provided during the Walkerton water crisis.

- Does your party support privatizing OCWA, or would you maintain it as a public agency to offer a cost-effective alternative for smaller municipalities, provide emergency services, and work in partnership with the Ministry of the Environment?

8. Environmental protection – MNR/MoE

In April 2007, the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario issued a report stating that neither the Ministry of Natural Resources nor the Ministry of the Environment have the capacity they need to carry out their mandates. In the last 15 years, funding for the Ministry of Natural Resources has fallen 18 per cent, in real terms, while funding for the Ministry of the Environment has fallen 34 per cent. Meanwhile, the scope, volume, and complexity of work of both ministries have expanded greatly.

- Will your party restore funding to the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Ministry of the Environment so that real per-capita funding for each ministry reaches its 1992-93 levels? If so, by when?

9. Environmental protection – municipalities

Municipalities operate our Conservation Authorities, run environmental education programs, protect wildlands, operate sewage treatment and waste disposal facilities, and are taking steps on their own to fight global warming.

- What is your strategy to support the environmental protection activities of our municipalities?

10. Environmental protection – Ontario Parks

Ontario now has 329 provincial parks, 292 conservation reserves, and 10 wilderness areas. Yet the province is contributing just \$15.3 million in operating funding this year to help them meet their mandate. Just 21 per cent of parks funding comes from Queen's Park, the lowest level of any province in Canada. According to the MNR, our parks generate \$390 million in economic activity and 14,000 person-years of employment for Ontario. A 2001 MNR report estimated that the parks generated at least \$41 million in provincial tax revenue. That number would be \$46 million today, after inflation.

- Will your party triple the provincial contribution to our provincial parks, from \$15.3 million to \$46 million, to ensure that all revenue generated by parks is invested in park operations?

11. Health care privatization – community health care

Under the current “competitive bidding” model, community health care has become a revolving door for workers who work for the same employer for a few years, only to lose their jobs when a new employer takes over the service. This model drives down wages, interrupts worker-client relationships, and causes many workers to leave community health care at the first opportunity.

- Will your party scrap the competitive bidding model for community health care? If not, would you bring in successor rights for unionized home care workers so that they automatically follow their jobs, with their union and their collective agreement, when their work is transferred to a new employer?

12. Health care privatization - hospitals

The private sector's role involvement in Ontario's hospitals has been growing steadily for over a decade.

- What is your position on using taxpayer dollars to pay private for-profit companies to deliver hospital services such as diagnostic and lab services, or so-called "ancillary" services like food, cleaning, and laundry services?
- What is your position on using taxpayer dollars to fund private profits through so-called private-public partnerships in the hospital sector?

13. Hospital professionals

Right now Ontario's hospitals face dramatic shortages for many health care professionals such as laboratory technologists, respiratory therapists, x-ray technologists, and so on.

- What is your strategy to end staffing shortages of hospital professionals?

14. Human rights – Bill 107

In December 2006, a bill to change the work of the Ontario Human Rights Commission received Royal Assent. Critics of Bill 107 say it fails to address the Commission's biggest problem – a shortage of resources – and will reduce support and limit access to justice for people with human rights complaints.

- What is your plan to strengthen the Ontario Human Rights Commission to ensure that the backlog of human rights complaints is addressed and all people who are victims of human rights violations receive speedy justice?
- What is your plan to assess and remove barriers to justice created by requiring all complaints to be litigated?

15. LCBO – deposit-return system for liquor bottles

In February 2007, the Ontario government implemented a deposit-return system for liquor containers. The new system is inconvenient – customers must return empties to The Beer Store – and prevents re-use of containers.

- If your party is elected, will you implement a new deposit-return system that will see liquor containers returned to the LCBO?
- Will you instruct the LCBO to use its market power to work with wineries and distilleries to increase the re-use of liquor containers, particularly bottles?

16. LCBO – privatization

The Liquor Control Board of Ontario is extremely profitable, earning more than \$1.2 billion a year in profits alone for the Ontario government. Many private investors would like to see the LCBO privatized or turned into an income trust so that investors can get a share of LCBO profits.

- What is your position on the privatization of the LCBO?

17. LCBO – agency stores

Despite publicly opposing the privatization of the LCBO, the current government is expanding the so-called “agency stores” program to allow about 200 gas stations, grocery stores, and other private businesses to sell alcohol to the public. This program costs the province money, robs communities of the service and selection of a real LCBO store, and has opened the door to alcohol sales to minors.

- What is your party’s position on agency stores? If elected, will you bring in stricter limits on the agency stores program and replace agency stores with real LCBO outlets where this would increase provincial revenue?

18. Local Health Integration Networks

Perhaps the biggest change to Ontario’s health care system in recent years has been the introduction of Local Health Integration Networks, or LHINs.

- Given that the LHINs are intended to reflect the health needs of communities, do you favour electing the Boards of Directors of LHINs at the community level, in the same way we elect school board trustees?
- Given that the LHINs have a mandate to integrate health services, would you be willing to negotiate with health care unions and fund a province-wide human resources adjustment plan to ensure that health care workers are not forced to shoulder the cost of restructuring?

19. Long term care

The key issue facing the quality of care in Ontario’s long term care sector is funding for staff to spend time with their clients.

- Will you support and fund a legislated, province-wide staffing standard that ensures a minimum of 3.5 hours of nursing and personal care per resident per day in long-term care facilities?

20. Meat inspection

The Haines Inquiry into meat inspection in Ontario strongly supported the work of provincial meat inspectors working for the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). The Haines report was instrumental in bringing meat inspection, which had been privatized by the Mike Harris government, back into the Ontario Public Service in 2004.

- If your party is elected, will you guarantee that provincial meat inspectors will remain as OMAFRA employees and that their work will not be transferred to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency?

21. Mental health

Over the last three decades, governments of every stripe have pursued a policy of moving people with mental illnesses out of hospitals and into the community. Yet community mental health care has never been adequately funded.

- What is your plan to ensure that mental health services in the community are properly funded and accessible to all?

22. Ontario Disability Support Program

Presently, Ontario Disability Support Program payments are so low that recipients' incomes are below the poverty line.

- If your party forms the next government, when will Ontario Disability Support payments be brought up to poverty-line levels?
- Will you reform the system so that intermittently-disabled and partially-employed people are not penalized?

23. Ontario Public Service

In the last 15 years, the Ontario Public Service has been downsized by one-third. Funding pressures limit the capacity of almost every OPS ministry. Workers in the OPSEU bargaining unit in the OPS are still seeing their work transferred to other levels of government, to arm's length agencies, and to other bargaining units. We are seeing an increase in head-office policy jobs and a decrease in community-based service delivery jobs. We seem to be moving to a kind of "virtual government" that concentrates on managing non-governmental bodies instead of direct service delivery to the public.

- What is your vision for the public service? If your party is elected, what will the OPS look like in four years?

24. Ontario Public Service – job relocation

Conservative leader John Tory has pledged that, if elected, he will move 10 per cent of government office space and thousands of government jobs out of Toronto and relocate them to smaller communities affected by jobs losses in the last four years.

- What is your position on the relocation of public service jobs in Toronto to other communities?

25. Provincial highways – Area Term Contracts

The Ministry of Transportation of Ontario is actively working on plans to introduce “Area Term Contracts” for the management of provincial highways. Pioneered in New Zealand, these contracts to private operators would cover not only road maintenance but also road reconstruction. They would last up to 20 years.

MTO’s record with privatization has not been good. According to the provincial auditor, privatization of highway maintenance has not delivered the promised savings. And the Highway 407 consortium has free rein to raise road tolls until the year 2098.

- What is your party’s position on the use of Area Term Contracts for the maintenance and reconstruction of provincial highways?

26. Public education

- What is your plan for public school funding to ensure that all of our children can contribute equally to the future of this province? Will you change the current funding formula?

27. Public health labs

In May 2007, the government passed legislation to create a new Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion. This will move Ontario’s 12 public health laboratories outside of the Ontario Public Service.

- Will you revise the legislation to put the public health labs under the direction of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, as recommended by Justice Archie Campbell?
- If your party is elected, will you revise the legislation to keep the new agency within the OPS? If not, what steps will your government take to ensure that the jobs, working conditions and pensions of public health labs staff are protected, and the services they provide are maintained and adequately funded?

Workplace issues

28. Anti-scab legislation

In November 1995, the Mike Harris government changed Ontario law to permit employers to use scabs, also known as “replacement workers,” to perform the duties of workers who are on strike or locked out. This change gave an unfair advantage to employers involved in collective bargaining.

- If your party is elected, will you change the law to ban the use of scabs during work stoppages?

29. Card check certification

In 2005, the McGuinty government changed the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* (OLRA) to allow unions in the construction industry to certify new groups of workers when they can demonstrate that 55 per cent of employees have signed a union application card. This process, known as “card check certification,” is faster, simpler, and less open to employer interference and intimidation than the certification votes required in other sectors.

- If your party is elected, will you amend the OLRA to permit card check certification for all workers covered by Ontario law, not just those in the construction industry?

30. Classification issues – Crown employees

In 1995, the Mike Harris government changed the *Crown Employees Collective Bargaining Act* (CECBA) to make it against the law for an arbitrator to issue a binding ruling on Crown employee classification matters, i.e., classification grievances and job classification systems. Other Ontario workers (who do not work for the Crown or its agencies) face no such restrictions.

- Will your party undo the Mike Harris government’s change to CECBA and make it legal once again for arbitrators to rule on Crown employee classification issues?

31. Essential and emergency services – Ontario Public Service

Unlike workers in most bargaining units, public service employees are required to provide essential and emergency services in the event of a strike or lockout. This clearly tips the balance of power in favour of the employer, thereby a) increasing the likelihood of work stoppages; and b) increasing the duration of the work stoppages that do occur.

- Will your party change essential and emergency services legislation to make it fairer for public service employees? If so, how?

32. Minimum wage

More than one million Ontario workers earn less than \$10 an hour.

- If your party is elected, on what date will Ontario's minimum wage reach \$10 an hour? Why?

33. Occupational Health and Safety

In his final report on SARS crisis, the late Justice Archie Campbell recommended:

“That the precautionary principle, which states that action to reduce risk need not await scientific certainty, be expressly adopted as a guiding principle throughout Ontario's health, public health and worker safety systems by way of policy statement, by explicit reference in all relevant operational standards and directions, and by way of inclusion, through preamble, statement of principle, or otherwise, in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, the *Health Protection and Promotion Act*, and all relevant health statutes and regulations.”

- If elected, will your party implement Justice Campbell's recommendation to amend health and safety laws and regulations to include the precautionary principle?

34. Part-time and contingent workers

According to the Workers Action Centre, 37 per cent of jobs in Ontario are temporary, part-time or casual. Many of these jobs pay low wages and offer few benefits, if any, and force workers to travel between two or more jobs just to survive. In many cases, lax enforcement of provincial laws means employers get away with violating basic labour standards.

- Will you strengthen the *Employment Standards Act* to ensure that temp agencies and the employers who use them are held accountable for ensuring fair working conditions?”
- More generally, what is your strategy to help people in low-end jobs, at the bottom end of our wealthy economy, share in the prosperity of this province?

35. Part-time college workers

Under the *Colleges Collective Bargaining Act*, more than 17,000 part-time college workers are specifically excluded from union representation. In November 2006, the International Labour Organization, a body of the United Nations, has called on the Ontario government to change the law to permit college part-timers to unionize. And the Supreme Court of Canada ruled recently that collective bargaining is a protected right under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

- Does your party support union rights for part-time workers at our community colleges? If so, and if your party is elected, when will you change the law?

36. Pensions

Many Ontario public employees are enrolled in successful pension plans like the Hospitals of Ontario Pension Plan, the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System, the Ontario Teacher's Pension Plan, and the OPSEU Pension Trust. Thousands more are not so fortunate. Many public sector workers earn substandard wages and have no pension plan beyond the Canada Pension Plan.

- As the indirect employer of hundreds of thousands of public employees, what is your plan to ensure that all Ontario public sector employees will be able to retire at a reasonable age with a reasonable pension?"

37. Safety-engineered medical sharps

Health care workers across Ontario are routinely exposed to serious diseases like HIV and hepatitis because of needlestick injuries. More than 33,000 such injuries could be prevented every year – and millions of dollars in health care costs saved – if the next government passed legislation requiring the use of safety-engineered medical sharps in all health care settings.

- If elected, will your party introduce safety engineered medical sharps legislation as soon as possible?

38. SARS and the next pandemic

In January, the late Justice Archie Campbell said, in his final report on the SARS crisis, that hospitals and other health care workplaces are as dangerous as mines or factories. He talked about the need to build a safety culture in our hospitals and called for more training, optimal staffing levels, and a new approach.

- What is your plan to respond to Justice Campbell's recommendations so that we can successfully contain the next contagious disease pandemic and keep health care workers safe?

39. Violence in the workplace

Workplace violence is a common occurrence in children's aid, in correctional facilities, in developmental services, in health care, in liquor stores, in schools, and in many other workplaces. This violence includes harassment, ridicule, unwelcome teasing, harmful gossip, bullying, intimidation, physical assault, and property damage.

- Will your party introduce legislation to enhance and enforce protections against violence in the workplace?

Taxes and trade

40. Taxation, revenue, and your fiscal plan

In 2007-08, the Ontario budget will be missing more than \$15 billion as a result of tax cuts implemented by the Harris-Eves government. This amount equals the cost of running our entire public school system. As a result, there is a huge gap between the money Ontario needs to operate quality public services and the revenue available.

- What is your fiscal plan for Ontario for the next four years? If your party is elected, will you raise taxes? If so, which ones, and by how much? Will you cut taxes? If so, which ones, and by how much? If you do cut taxes, what public services will you cut to make up for the revenue shortfall?
- If your party is elected, what revenue measures other than taxes will you implement?

41. Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA)

The Trade, Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA) signed by the governments of British Columbia and Alberta came into effect on April 1, 2007. TILMA gives private enterprise unprecedented powers to challenge provincial or municipal laws and regulations that may pose a barrier to trade. Critics say TILMA will increase privatization of public services and weaken regulation of business activities.

- Does your party support Ontario's participation in TILMA or similar interprovincial agreements?

Electoral reform

42. Electoral reform for Ontario

The Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform has proposed a new way to elect Ontario's MPPs. In a referendum on Oct. 10, voters will vote on the Assembly's proposal of a Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) voting system.

- Does your party support or oppose the adoption of the Citizens' Assembly's MMP model?



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