

Kelly Egan: Tied to be FIT, like it or not

BY KELLY EGAN, OTTAWA CITIZEN APRIL 24, 2013



Citizen columnist Kelly Egan

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OTTAWA — Solar and wind power are either key ingredients to the future of the human race or the work of lefty, nutso, organic, rainbow-chasing, hemp-wearing, fringe-element whack-jobs.

Pardon the preview of the next Ontario election.

The provincial Conservatives don't much like wind and solar power. At least not with the payout structure set up by the Liberals, which saw the most expensive kind of solar power bought for 80 cents a kilowatt/hour from small producers, at a time when a kilowatt/hour was worth a nickel. The economics, on the surface, of insanity.

Having said that, it was neither solar nor wind that got Ontario into an Everest of hydro debt (\$13 billion, give or take.) No, that was nukes and such. Neither was it wind nor solar that, if Conservative figures are correct, gave us more than 11,000 workers in the public electricity sector making more than \$100,000 a year. No, that was nukes and such, with its army of required geniuses.

Mind-boggling.

Here's the political problem for the Tories, though. Lots of people, in theory, like wind and solar power. Others, in practice, have embraced it, particularly farmers and rural types, among their main constituents.

One estimate says one in seven farmers in Ontario have installed a small solar-powered project under the FIT (Feed-In Tariff) program. As long as the sun rises, the revenue to producers is guaranteed for 20 years, but the capital cost is covered in eight or nine. Who wouldn't love it?

The Conservatives have pledged to honour those contracts but terminate the FIT program. So, the electoral danger is to be campaigning as the killers of hope. (Throw in the death of all-day kindergarten expansion and they start to look like a troop of sourpusses.)

There is no doubt the Green Energy Act of 2009, which gave birth to FIT, has created an enthusiastic community of alternative-energy promoters and producers, now emboldened. Of speaking their minds, they have no fear.

Like the Ottawa Renewable Energy Co-operative, one of about 55 similar co-ops that have sprang up in Ontario.

It began as an idea, turned into a group, incorporated in 2010, and now has about 160 members who, in short order, raised close to \$1 million for investment in renewable energy. (Some members, interestingly, do not see this as a right-versus-left ideological debate, as much as a big-versus-small, community-versus-corporate, smart-versus-dumb opportunity.)

Janice Ashworth is the co-op operations manager and its only full-time employee. Lickety-split, it has managed to get six projects producing to the grid and five more on the way. (Leasing space on a suitable roof is often the quickest, easiest way to production.)

She was asked what would happen if Tim Hudak becomes premier in a couple of months — if the minority government falls with the May 2 budget — and the FIT program is cancelled.

“I think there would be some major backlash, politically. I would think all of the industry would pack up and head out of town.”

Well, perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. But, what, then, of OREC? “We’d have to change our business model drastically.”

The co-op, meanwhile, is moving full-steam ahead with spreading the gospel of green.

On Monday, it is sponsoring a Solar Soirée at Lago Bar & Grill at Dow’s Lake. Among the speakers is the manager of Belgium’s largest renewable energy co-op, with 25,000 members and the supply of 42,000 mw/h to the grid. (Event is free but registration is preferable.)

“It’s a celebration of what has been accomplished and a building of the vision of what’s possible,” said Ashworth.

Calculating the real cost of renewables is a shadowy exercise. The auditor-general in 2011 said they were adding \$2 a month to the average residential hydro bill, a figure to rise to \$31 by 2018. Offsetting the cost, however, were an estimated billions in medical savings by eliminating coal production and its associated health damage.

Adding further confusion to the broader debate is flat or declining consumption of electricity in Ontario, leading to accusations that the wind and solar power is simply superfluous, at the mercy of weather, and merely for show.

The FIT program has certainly been popular. As of early this year, roughly 15,000 applications have either been approved or were being worked on.

You can’t drive into the country in Eastern Ontario without running into solar panels on a barn roof. From my house in the city, even, I can see two installations from an upstairs window.

So the converts are many; the zeal great. Good luck unplugging that energy.

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