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Witmer stokes budget anger

Says health-care tax ignited provincial fury

Star poll shows little support for fiscal plan

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QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

Anger over health-care tax hikes in last month's Ontario budget is spreading like "brushfire," Conservative MPP Elizabeth Witmer said yesterday.

"Your budget has ignited an anger that is going throughout this province like a brushfire. I have never, in all my years of elected office, received so many e-mails, faxes, letters or visits," she told the Legislature.

Her comments during a raucous question period in the Legislature were echoed in a poll conducted for the Toronto Star, which found 57 per cent of people surveyed said the budget would leave them "worse off" and 55 per cent said they didn't like the budget at all. Not one person said it was an "excellent" budget.

There were 1,306 people polled last week and the results are considered accurate within 2.7 percentage points 19 times out of 20 for the national survey. The margin of error is higher for regional breakdowns.

The unpopular budget, which included a hefty health-care tax after the provincial Liberals promised not to raise taxes, has cast a pall over the federal Liberal electoral chances.

"It may well have been the most poorly received budget in contemporary political history in Canada," EKOS president Frank Graves told the Star last week.

The May 18 budget introduced health premiums of up to \$900 annually beginning July 1 for those with taxable incomes of \$20,000 or more.

NDP Leader Howard Hampton attacked the government for disproportionately "whacking" the poor with its new health-care tax, saying that a single mother earning \$30,000 a year will see her income tax jump 24 per cent versus 6 per cent for a \$100,000 earner.

"Is this your definition of fairness? Is this what Dalton McGuinty meant when he said to working families, 'I won't raise your taxes?'"

Finance Minister Greg Sorbara was left to fend off the 35-minute attack from the Conservatives and New Democrats because Premier Dalton McGuinty was in Northern Ontario, handing out money for hospitals in Thunder Bay and Sudbury.

Sorbara said other than the health-care tax, voters across the province support the Liberals' first budget.

"We found ourselves in a situation where the only way in which we could provide quality health care is to raise additional revenues with the Ontario health premium," the finance minister, who promised not to raise taxes just weeks before the budget, told reporters

"The positive measures in the budget are being well received in every corner of the province."

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Sorbara also said it didn't bother him that McGuinty gave Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin a heads-up on the fact that an unpopular health-care premium would be in the budget, which critics said violated the confidentiality of the budget process.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation announced yesterday it had filed suit against the government for breaking a written commitment with the organization not to raise taxes without first holding a referendum.

With files from Canadian Press

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