



Back to Winning back rural Ontario

## Winning back rural Ontario

November 15, 2011

Michael Warren

He was invited to bolster the chances of the Liberals in the rural riding of Grey Bruce. The most controversial local issue was industrial wind farms invading the pristine countryside.

Finance Minister Dwight Duncan addressed the crowd with an air of urban superiority. "Windmills. I know it's a difficult issue up here . . . but in 10 years you people are going to look back and say, what was all the fuss about?"

The next day's headline read, "King Dwight tells rural Ontario: Eat cake." The Liberal candidate, a respected mayor in the region, lost by a large margin to a neophyte Conservative who didn't work or live in the riding.

One of Premier Dalton McGuinty's greatest challenges will be winning back rural Ontario. Doing that starts with questioning why the Liberals came out of the October election an urban-only government.

First, McGuinty allowed his last government to develop a big city "we know best" attitude.

It was as if those who lived in rural communities just weren't capable of fathoming the complexities of modern life on their own. Many also felt that the Liberals were allowing urban Ontario set the agenda, and then imposing the results on everyone else.

Second, his rural MPPs and cabinet ministers failed to impress on McGuinty and the party apparatus the depth and nature of the rural discontent. Almost all of them, including agriculture minister Carol Mitchell, went down to defeat.

Third, the premier is an urbanite, as are most of his closest policy and political advisors.

Three-time campaign chair, Greg Sorbara, is a savvy strategist. But he isn't known for his rural political instincts. That showed in the party's "Plan for Rural Ontario" — an uninspired rehash of their past record and existing funding promises.

Finally, urban and rural voters may share more similarities on political issues than they do differences. But when differences arise, feelings run deep.

Conservative Leader Tim Hudak sensed the rural outrage about wind farms. He promised to scrap the Green Energy Act and focus on other energy sources.

The Liberals gambled that rural Ontario wouldn't vote against their green energy initiatives. But they did, and in spades.

Ten of the 18 seats lost to the opposition were in ridings targeted by anti-wind coalitions. They made the election in these ridings a referendum about halting wind farm development, and restoring the ability of local councils to intervene.

Political pandering in urban centres further fuelled this rural frustration. The wind farms that were supposed to be installed in Lake Ontario, off the Scarborough Bluffs and near Kingston, were conveniently cancelled months before the election. Then during the election the Liberals backed away from plans for two natural gas plants in the GTA.



Premier Dalton McGuinty felt a cool electoral breeze from rural Ontario over the issue of wind farms.

DAVE CHIDLEY/THE CANADIAN PRESS

While backtracking in cities, the Liberals continued to sanction large-scale wind farms in rural settings. Even a small nod toward green energy reform during the election could have yielded a clear majority for the Liberals.

Rural folks were also skeptical about the Liberals' "Environmental Stewardship." Unlike some advanced jurisdictions, Ontario doesn't require its cities to manage their own waste in their own backyards. In Sweden, nearly half of their unrecyclable waste is processed in their cities to generate electricity.

Almost all of our urban waste is still going into rural landfill.

Because the province has failed to provide cities with approved methods to process their garbage using modern technology, burying waste remains the norm. In 2007 Toronto quietly bought a huge hole in the ground north of St. Thomas.

Now hundreds of trucks drive down Highway 401, and over local roads, to dump Toronto's waste in the "Green Lane" landfill. It's an archaic solution that still rattles rural voters. Some asked, "If they let that happen, what will they do with the 'Mega Quarry' proposal?"

Winning back the hearts and minds of rural Ontario won't be easy.

The Liberals no longer have a rural caucus. All the departments that deal with rural communities and farmers are now headed by ministers who represent city ridings.

They have to find new ways to reconnect with small town Ontario. McGuinty might consider establishing a rural policy forum made up of community leaders that he trusts and respects.

If such a forum existed today, they would tell Energy Minister Chris Bentley that his recently announced plan to examine Feed-In-Tariff (FIT) prices doesn't go far enough.

Rural communities want and deserve a full review the Green Energy Act. To realize the full potential of green power, and improve relations with rural communities, the Liberals need to modify their corporately dominated business model.

In Germany, a world leader in renewable energy, more than 50 per cent of wind turbines are owned by communities, cooperatives and individuals. This is the result of funding and grid access that deliberately encourages community-based projects. When local groups take the lead role in wind energy, questionable health and land value concerns diminish.

The Legislature resumes next week. Rural Ontario will be searching the Speech from the Throne to see if the Liberals have taken their electoral message seriously.

*R. Michael Warren is CEO of The Warren Group Inc. He is a former corporate director, Ontario deputy minister, TTC chief general manager and CEO of Canada Post. r. [michael.warren@gmail.com](mailto:michael.warren@gmail.com)*