

---

## John Ivison: Hudak's apprentice plan offers spark of hope

John Ivison Sep 29, 2011 – 1:03 PM ET

"I have no skills," Tim Hudak claimed, as he tried to change a spark plug at a community college photo op to highlight his apprenticeship plan.

Funny, Dalton McGuinty has been making this point for some time, claiming this is no time to hand over the reins of power in Ontario to untested rookies like Mr. Hudak or NDP leader Andrea Horwath.

In fact, the 2011 election could justifiably be billed as the W.C. Fields campaign, after the American comic actor's famous claim that he "never voted for anybody – I always voted against." Mr. Hudak's campaign has been uninspiring, often silly (remember "buck-a-beer" pricing), and invariably focused on portraying Mr. McGuinty as being as useless as a pulled tooth. Much of the rhetoric from all leaders could be summed up in the appeal: Vote for me, I'm not great but I'll do least harm.

It was, then, refreshing to hear the Tory leader tell a business audience in Ottawa how he would solve Ontario's jobs crisis. The province has actually added 102,000 jobs in the last year, second only to Alberta in employment growth. But the unemployment rate is still higher than the national average and factory employment remains 92,000 jobs below pre-recession levels.

Mr. Hudak presented his five-point plan to ensure that "Ontario will lead again". Some of the ideas were pure wind — all governments pledge to eliminate red tape, few manage it. Mr. Hudak promises to reduce the regulatory burden by 30% or he'll dock his own pay — another silly stunt that we'll never hear about again after election day.

One of the other points is sound but replicates what the Liberals are already doing — namely, reducing corporate taxes to 10%.

A third point is to lower taxes for families. "An Ontario PC government will remove the HST from hydro and home heating bills and eliminate the Debt Retirement Charge from hydro bills. This will save Ontario households \$275 per year. We will also reduce personal income taxes...lowering taxes by 5% on the first \$75,000 of income," he said.

All are laudable goals — if only the province could afford them. But Ontario is broke and there must be huge question-marks about how many of these expensive promises a Hudak government would be able to afford. The tax cuts alone would cost \$3.5-billion, while the Liberals estimate it would cost \$1.8-billion over four years to eliminate the Debt Retirement Charge. The Tories haven't allocated any money in their plan for that particular commitment.

The Conservatives are on firmer ground with their fourth point — to end the feed-in-tariff that has contributed to spiking hydro charges. There will be huge costs associated with cancelling the multi-billion dollar deal with Samsung for renewable energy, but re-introducing the laws of economics to the electricity sector and de-politicizing energy policy would be progress indeed. In a fiery speech in Ottawa, Mr. Hudak had a pithy criticism of Liberal economic policy. "You can't subsidize your way to better jobs. You can't tax your way to prosperity. You can't spend your way out of debt," he said.

It is with his fifth pledge — the creation of 200,000 new skilled trades positions for registered apprentices — that Mr. Hudak offers a glimpse of the forward and creative thinking that will be needed by the next government.

With it, he offers solutions to a problem that the Liberals cannot solve because they are beholden to special interests whose agenda runs contrary to the general interest.

In 2009, Mr. McGuinty established the College of Trades, an unwieldy body dominated by representatives of compulsory certified trades which sets apprentice ratios in the province. Vested interest has kept the ratio of journeymen to apprentices much higher in Ontario than in other provinces, with the aim of driving up wages. For example, in Ontario there are five journeymen bricklayers for every apprentice, compared to 1:1 in Nova Scotia and 1:2 in Alberta. The attempt to artificially stifle the number of apprentices will have a long-term cost — Mr. Hudak cited an Ontario Ministry of Finance study that suggests there will be over one million unfilled, skilled job vacancies by 2021.

The Tory plan is to move administration of apprenticeships from the College of Trades and reduce the journeyman-apprentice ratio to 1:1 – a cost-neutral move that would open up thousands of new apprenticeship spaces. The move has the support of the Ontario construction employers and the undying hostility of the unions – which, in itself, suggests this is a good policy.

The battle over apprenticeships is a microcosm of the larger fiscal battle. Mr. McGuinty is obliged to the public sector unions for their support and relative quiescence over the past eight years, which will make it difficult for him to confront the legacy of deficit and debt that he created. Mr. Hudak owes no such allegiance and, as he has shown on the apprentices issue, is not afraid to confront special interests if they are operating against the general interest. The Hudak campaign has not been designed to inspire hope but the leader's experiment with spark plugs has seen a glimmer of optimism emerge.

[jivison@nationalpost.com](mailto:jivison@nationalpost.com)

Posted in: [Canada](#), [Full Comment](#) Tags: [Andrea Horwath](#), [Apprenticeships](#), [Conservative Campaign](#), [Construction Industry](#), [Dalton McGuinty](#), [HST](#), [Jobless Crisis](#), [John Ivison](#), [Ontario Economy](#), [Ontario Election 2011](#), [Tim Hudak](#)