

Cohn: Ontario reverses its spin on offshore wind

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Rick Smith, executive director of Environmental Defense, speaks to media in this July 30, 2009 file photo.
Sarah Dea/Toronto Star



By [Martin Regg Cohn](#) Queen's Park Columnist

Regime change in Egypt can come in handy when you're trying to hang on to power here in Ontario. So what better time than a Friday afternoon, with all eyes on the fall of dictatorship in Cairo, for Queen's Park to cut loose its own political deadweight — offshore wind turbines.

Turbines were threatening too much political turbulence for Premier Dalton McGuinty in an election year. Better to shore up his own democratic prospects by reversing himself on offshore turbines on a day when Ontario voters were looking elsewhere.

That was the political — and communications — calculation made by the Liberal team when it suddenly announced that renewable energy offshore is dead in the water. But the government's decision to bend with the political winds left the environmental movement reeling.

Rick Smith, who heads the lobby group Environmental Defence, still hadn't heard the news when I called, though the urgent messages started coming in from government liaison people as we spoke. Like most environmentalists, he hadn't expected the premier to trim his sails at the first sight of stormy seas.

"I'm surprised that I would have to find about it from you," Smith fumed. "We're one of the key stakeholders."

But voters, not stakeholders, are what count with an election less than eight months away. And while the front lawn of Queen's Park is not exactly Tahrir Square these days, wind turbines have been nothing but trouble for the McGuinty government.

Ontario is seen as ground zero for the anti-turbine movement, both onshore and offshore. There are louder protests here — and more media coverage — than elsewhere on the continent, says Robert Hornung, who tracks the movement for his membership at the Canadian Wind Energy Association.

Smith argues that the government is gaining nothing from the move: "The leadership of the anti-wind groups are opposed to wind turbines period — onshore *and* offshore."

Offshore applications to date make up only a handful of the many hundreds received so far, and the government's terse news release pointed out that none have been built. Queen's Park is pulling the plug until "further scientific research is conducted."

But the reality is that public opinion research, rather than scientific research, is driving the government's agenda these days. A number of Liberal ridings are being buffeted by wind turbine troubles, notably the Scarborough seat held by Energy Minister Brad Duguid.

The premier likes to boast in his speeches about Ontario's groundbreaking renewable energy policies and his focus on good government. He has long resisted NIMBYism, and his ministers are known to mock them as BANANAs — Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything. But with an election coming, his new priority is putting out political fires — most recently by nixing the gas-fired power plant in Oakville that threatened another Liberal seat.

The opposition is profiting from the anti-wind movement, with many MPPs stirring it up in their ridings at every opportunity. Most of the huffing and puffing is directed against onshore wind farms, which face a 550-metre setback. Offshore turbines, by contrast, faced a five-kilometre setback — virtually out of sight, but by no means out of mind.

The enduring setback, environmentalists say, is to their own movement. Rather than calming the anti-wind movement, McGuinty's climb-down could well energize it.

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