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Induced confusion

Is it working? Are you confused about wind energy yet? Confusion was the remedy offered by Sussex Strategy Group last fall in a pitch to the Ontario Government. Seeing that the McGuinty Liberals were facing tough headwinds from voters on its energy policies—the Toronto based public relations firm offered to help. Confuse the public was their prescription.

It advised the provincial government to “change the channel” from rising electricity bills to the perceived virtues of renewable energy. To do this it is “critical to confuse the issue of renewable energy” according to the plan devised by the PR hacks.

For a handsome fee they would try and change the story. Nothing particularly new here. Public relations firms were invented to try and change the story—create new brands, improve the image of fading ones and restore the fortunes of brands that are suddenly out of favour.

What made the proposal newsworthy, however, was that McGuinty seemed prepared to entertain and embrace the “induced confusion” campaign. It reveals the level of anxiety felt in Liberal ranks in advance of next fall’s election. This is because Ontario residents are opening their electricity bills in fear these days.

The renewable energy zealots say that consumers don’t like price hikes at first, but will adjust. But others suggest that Ontario residents are getting wise to the high cost and severe limitations of wind and solar generated electricity. Others are learning firsthand that living close to massive wind turbines could be dangerous to one’s health.

Dalton McGuinty’s worst fear is that the average consumers begins to ask troubling questions about the sketchy energy path his government has led this province down. It is why he has turned to hacks to try and confuse the issues. When Sussex’s proposal was splashed all over the media last October—it seemed a black eye for the government and the firm. But not so for Sussex Strategy. The McGuinty Liberals were forced to back away, but there was a large gaggle of private developers who were just as interested in seeing the public “confused” by renewable energy. For the province it could scarcely have worked out better. Sussex is out trying to change the channel and the industry is paying for it.

Closer to home, Gilead Power is one of the developers that has retained Sussex Strategy to improve its fortunes. The move reveals a significant shift in tactics of the Peterborough-based wind developer. It hardly has the resources to be spending on a PR firm yet it has concluded that it can't afford not to.

With the bankruptcy of Skypower two years ago, Gilead's plans in South Marysburgh suddenly rose to prominence. The developer is hoping its Ostrander Point project will be the first large-scale wind factory built in the County—targeting construction in the summer.

But by hiring a public relations firm, especially this PR firm, Gilead is tipping its hand that it is worried the McGuinty government's resolve might not hold much longer. It has sunk a great deal of money into this project and Gilead is likely fearful the opposition to wind energy is growing. If the province were to buckle under the pressure, or even allow delays to creep into the approvals process, the results could be catastrophic for the smallish developer.

Other developers are in the same boat. This is all keeping Sussex Strategy quite busy these days. Business is good in the confusion game.

Day in court

On Monday, Big Island's Ian Hanna faces down the provincial government in a courtroom in Toronto. Here a judge will be asked to rule whether the provincial government took enough precaution to protect the health of nearby residents when it allowed developers to erect massive 100-metre turbines into the sky but just 500 metres from a neighbour's home.

Hanna, along with his counsel Eric Gillespie and advisor Bob McMurtry, will not try to prove that wind turbines cause harm but rather that it is the government's responsibility to prove they are safe. They want the province to conduct a comprehensive epidemiological study to examine the effects of these massive generators on those who must live among them.

In at least two other decisions, the courts have ruled that precautionary principle must be applied when human health is at potential risk. The test of potential risk has been more than amply passed by evidence presented by the Society for Wind Vigilance in papers, conferences and the growing legion of victims.

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