

Kathleen Wynne mounts her harshest attack yet on Stephen Harper



[David Reevely](#)

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Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau, left, campaigns with Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne during a stop in Toronto on Monday, August 17, 2015. Darren Calabrese / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Premier Kathleen Wynne made her sharpest attacks yet on the federal Conservatives in a speech Monday to the Economic Club in Toronto.

The speech never mentioned Conservative Leader Stephen Harper or his party, but it was really all about him. It itemized failures Wynne sees in federal policies and ultimately saying that she hopes Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau is elected prime minister.

Climate change: “Canada’s international reputation would be enhanced by a Prime Minister who is willing to accompany the premiers to this fall’s Paris conference on climate change — and take on a real and meaningful leadership role, not only at the negotiating table, but on a day-to-day basis.”

Refugees and international trade: “We need national leadership that steps up to meet the challenge of this humanitarian crisis. We need national leadership to help those whose lives — through no fault of their own — are defined by chaos, hardship and threat.”

Infrastructure and transit: “We are doing our part. And the federal government can do its part by substantially increasing its investment in infrastructure — driving productivity and growth,

improving quality of life, reducing pollution and emissions and making our cities and towns even more attractive to the best talent in the world.”

Aboriginals: “We cannot, with any integrity, talk of a healthy, harmonious, pluralistic society until we forge a new relationship with the people whose ancestors were here long before most of ours. Our government is playing its part, but we cannot do it alone. We need leadership from the national government — real leadership that includes a genuine commitment to breaking the cycle of despair.”

Pensions: “The lack of leadership from our federal government forced us to create Ontario Retirement Pension Plan. We could not stand by and watch hard-working people move toward a retirement in which their standard of living would sharply decline.”

It’s a firebreathing speech. Given Wynne’s relative unpopularity these days (a recent Mainstreet poll put her Liberals 10 points behind the Progressive Conservatives, 40-30), it’s not super-clear how helpful her intervention is at this point. If you’re the sort of person inclined to listen to Kathleen Wynne, you’re probably voting for Trudeau anyway.

But perhaps there are conservative-minded voters who might be peeled away from the Conservative party with a little more effort. The fact she chose to rest her arguments now on *economic* grounds is interesting, inasmuch as it means attacking Harper on what’s supposed to be his home turf. And Wynne is right, at least conceptually, that there are economic dimensions to everything from climate-change policy to Aboriginal education to how many refugees Canada takes in. Decisions on those fronts have effects on what our industries do and the size and quality of our workforce, now and in the future.

We usually talk about these issues in terms of right and wrong, but looking at them in economic terms has value, too. One reason — not the most important, but one of them — to try to break the cycle of Aboriginal poverty is that it’s very, very expensive for everyone.

Again, I don’t know that Wynne is the best possible messenger, but she did win an election in Ontario a year ago and that’s not nothing, given Ontario’s importance in the outcome of the federal election.

Contrast Newfoundland and Labrador, where former premier Danny Williams had a few things to say on Monday, too:

“Over time we’ve seen that this man cannot be trusted. He had no integrity. He’s trying to stifle democracy. There’s no end to what he’s doing,” said Williams.

“He’s a lousy prime minister who’s divisive.”

When asked what it would take for the federal Conservatives to re-establish themselves in Newfoundland and Labrador, Williams answered simply: “A change of leadership is what’s needed here.”

Williams is a Progressive Conservative and left office very popular, so his words might carry more weight than Wynne's, but the federal Tories are nowhere in Newfoundland to begin with.

Williams also has nothing whatsoever to lose. From the beginning, Wynne was betting heavily on, if not a Liberal win, at least a Conservative loss, and she keeps pushing more chips into the pot.

dreevely@ottawacitizen.com
twitter.com/davidreevely