

Ont. budget not behind Liberal slide: McGuinty



Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty

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TORONTO — The Ontario budget, with its unexpected and unpopular tax hikes, isn't the cause of the federal Liberals' quick slide in opinion polls during the first week of the June 28 election campaign, Premier Dalton McGuinty said Tuesday.

Ontario voters understand his government had no option but to break its promise not to raise taxes because the previous Conservative government misled people by claiming the province's books were balanced, McGuinty said.

"There's a world of difference between the federal campaign and the provincial campaign," said McGuinty, reiterating remarks he made over the weekend.

"In the federal campaign, the government of the day is not hiding a \$6 billion deficit."

Prime Minister Paul Martin tried to distance himself from the Ontario Liberals on Monday, telling schoolchildren in Saskatoon that "if I come to you and ask you to vote for me because I'm going to do certain things, and I don't do them, then I have broken faith."

McGuinty wouldn't say what he thinks of Martin's comments, but predicted voters would understand why he felt the need to introduce health-care premiums.

"People are very receptive once they understand what has happened here in Ontario, in the fiscal context," he said.

McGuinty also said there was a lot of time left for the federal Liberals to turn things around before the June 28 vote and get back some of the momentum, which so far has seen support for the Conservatives rise to nearly equal with the Liberals.

"That's a lifetime in politics," said McGuinty, who added voters realize Conservative leader Stephen Harper is making promises he would not be able to keep if elected.

"People, particularly here in Ontario, will have learned from prior experience: you can't have your cake and eat it too," said McGuinty.

"You can't have dramatic tax cuts and the necessary dollars available for the improvement of our health care."

Education Minister Gerard Kennedy admitted federal Liberals are facing criticism on doorsteps because of the Ontario budget, but said people just need to be told why the province raised taxes in the budget.

"I think the whole story is not something that we have to apologize for, but rather we need to work very, very hard and explain, explain, explain to people why this was necessary," said Kennedy.

Management Board Chair Gerry Phillips agreed, saying the government owes people a good explanation for the health-care premiums and other tax hikes in the budget, not an apology.

"They understand the need to fix our health-care system, our education system, and they're prepared to support it," said Phillips.

"So I think to everybody worried about the federal campaign: it's not how you start, it's how you finish."

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