

Report From Queen's Park



by
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The Legislature's Committee studying Hydro's 1976 rates has predicted an increase of 34.5 percent in the cost of producing electric power next year. The projected increase could mean an escalation of 25 percent to 30 percent, and up to 34 percent in power rates to municipal utilities and large industries, depending on local circumstances. In the same draft report to the Legislature, the Committee suggests that the rate of increase in electricity production costs will drop sharply between 1978 and 1980, flattening out in the 1980's to a range of 5 percent to 10 percent each year.

A Hydro spokesman has said that the projections were made on the basis of evidence from Hydro witnesses, but stressed that the actual calculations and a chart in the report were the product of the Committee's staff. Hydro's proposals for 1977 rates are now being prepared for submission to the Energy Minister within the next three weeks, and these will form the basis for an Ontario Energy Board review beginning in August.

Members of all three parties in the Legislature have supported a Private Member's Bill to provide an Ontario Freedom of Information Act. Such a Bill, if enacted, would reverse the present trend in government to keep secret all information except what it chooses to make public. All information would be made public except certain categories which could legitimately be kept secret. No vote was taken on the Bill. Private Bills usually die on the order paper.

Proposed legislation forbidding private medical labs to reward doctors with gifts of money will not proceed before the fall, according to the Minister of Health. In an interview, the Minister said his legal advisers find it difficult to change the bill, introduced by the government last April, to remove aspects which displease him. He said he plans to outline some steps the government might take during the debate on his Ministry's Estimates before the Legislature recesses for the summer. Regulations will be introduced soon under existing legislation to deal with doctor's conflict of interest, tab billing procedures and a new form for doctors to use when ordering tests from labs. The proposed legislation, which ran into heavy opposition during debate, would allow the government to lift a lab's licence or restrict the types of tests a lab may conduct. The Minister has criticized the government bill for allowing labs no right to appeal shut-down orders and for giving the government too sweeping powers.

The Supreme Court of Canada is hearing arguments as to whether the federal Anti-Inflation Act is within Ottawa's rights under the constitution and whether Ontario's agreement placing provincial public employees under the wage control is legal. This agreement was signed after an order passed by the cabinet, not after approval by the Legislature. The constitutionality of the Ottawa-Ontario pact was challenged before the Ontario Supreme Court by teachers in Renfrew, following an Anti-Inflation Board rollback of a pay increase which they had won.

Ontario, incidentally, is the only province completely in support of Ottawa's position that the anti-inflation law passed by Parliament last fall is constitutionally valid. Alberta, the Canadian Labour Congress, and unions representing teachers and other Ontario civil servants are arguing the law is an improper intrusion by Ottawa into provincial jurisdiction.

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