



[Back to Cohn: Hudak's vision looks backward](#)

## Cohn: Hudak's vision looks backward

September 30, 2011

Martin Regg Cohn

A funny thing happened to Tim Hudak on the campaign trail that was taking him, until recently, straight to the premier's office.

He stayed on message. And it took him off track.

Hudak gave virtuoso performances at his campaign kick-off and in this week's televised debate. He mastered every oratorical device. Pressed every emotional button.

But there was something about his attacks that missed the mark: He didn't give a persuasive account of how he'd make things better — playing shell games with numbers while pushing the envelope with his crude demonization of "foreign workers."

Hudak has blown a commanding lead in the polls, leaving the election too close to call. He has failed to connect — really connect — with a majority of voters who were weary of Liberal Leader Dalton McGuinty after two terms as premier.

Hudak's Ontario is everything and nothing: He has a platform bereft of timbre and a vision that looks backward.

This week, Hudak made much of his "five-point plan" for job-creation, the centrepiece of his platform. It is all over the map, consisting largely of warmed over tax cuts that would starve the province of funds for future programs. And boilerplate promises to cut red tape or close inefficient agencies.

His crusade against the HST has never added up because the provincial (and federal) Tories had long called for harmonization with the federal GST. Hudak pivoted for political advantage, then tried to have it both ways: He knew better than to kill it off, so he now talks of taking it off hydro and heating — but otherwise retaining it. Same with the health tax that McGuinty introduced in 2003: Hudak assailed it, but quietly admitted this year he'd keep it.

Hudak has gone further by promising to take the Debt Retirement Charge off hydro bills without saying how he'll take care of it. He claims Ontarians have already repaid their share of the old Ontario Hydro debt because their payments exceed the original principal — which any homeowner with a 25-year mortgage knows to be nonsense.

He would also reduce taxes through income-splitting. All this tax-cutting adds up to the core of his economic strategy: "As you know, lower income tax is the most effective way of creating new jobs," he told one business audience this week.

Hudak boasts that he'll also create jobs by reducing corporate tax rates. Sounds like a bold initiative, except that it precisely mirrors what the Liberal government has already done.

Hudak shows greatest chutzpah in condemning McGuinty for running up large deficits during the

economic crisis, when in fact the Liberals inherited a hidden \$5.6 billion deficit from the last Tory government in which he was a minister. Hudak's current plan for deficit-reduction is a mirror image of McGuinty's timetable.

On social programs, Hudak hews to a conservative line: his most notorious plan would require people in provincial jails to do mandatory work in so-called "chain gangs" — a promise he'll never keep because it's too costly (think unionized jail guards). Ontario today is not Alabama in the 1950s.

Hudak is no Mike Harris. Although Harris endorsed his leadership, Hudak is much more modulated. But he sometimes forgets himself, giving us a glimpse of his more immoderate impulses.

At the start of the campaign, Hudak crossed a line by stirring up crowds across Ontario with his lament that "foreign workers" would be getting a leg up on them — blatantly distorting a Liberal proposal to help recently arrived Canadian citizens. It wasn't a slip of the tongue, but a carefully considered attack line.

He has been endorsed, belatedly, by another former premier, Bill Davis. But he pays him little heed. Hudak once confirmed to me that Davis had reminded him of his mother's admonition, "William, in all things moderation."

Another suggestion from Davis: "You'll never get criticized for the speech you don't give."

Advice that Hudak forgot on the campaign trail. And when cobbling together his platform.

**[Martin Regg Cohn's provincial affairs column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday.](#)**  
**[mcohn@thestar.ca](mailto:mcohn@thestar.ca), [twitter.com/reggcohn](https://twitter.com/reggcohn).**