

PREMIER MAKES CASE TO AMALGAMATE REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

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Premier makes case to amalgamate regional governance

08.08.2019 [David Hains](#) 0

A freewheeling Premier **Doug Ford** gave a clear indication that some Ontario municipalities can expect amalgamation in the near future.

The premier decried the number of politicians in the Niagara Region as he spontaneously chose to field questions from reporters at an announcement in Fonthill.

When asked by a local reporter about the potential amalgamation that could affect the Niagara region and many other Ontario municipalities, Ford led off by saying it's under review by Municipal Affairs Minister **Steve Clark**, but then outlined what outcome makes sense to him.

"Minister Clark is going to be rolling that out over the next little while," he said in a local hardware store alongside PC MPP **Sam Oosterhoff**. But then Ford said that he would prefer fewer politicians, based on what he's heard from residents. "Go door-knocking in the area. It's almost comical. You've got 136 politicians for 400,000 people. Something's wrong," said the premier, whose father lost his seat as an MPP when the PCs reduced the number of ridings in the legislature in the late 1990s.

The premier argued it's a matter of saving money. "That's just wasting taxpayers' money. But I have all the confidence in the world in Minister Clark to straighten out any of those issues, and make sure we respect the taxpayers and run a leaner, more efficient government," he said. He added that residents have told him they don't like the number of politicians they have. "I've heard it from them — they aren't too happy about that."

The premier's remarks inflame a sensitive issue for the PC government. The Tories had pushed back the recommendations from the minister's municipal governance review until after the fall election, as amalgamation is an unpopular issue in many regions throughout Ontario. Earlier in 2019 the mayor of Walkerton told *QP Briefing* it was a top-of-mind issue for him, saying that the small municipality is worried that its political say wouldn't be heard over Owen Sound. And

the issue also comes up just less than two weeks before the annual Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference, where municipal leaders will have the chance to share their concerns with the government.

Clark previously told *QP Briefing* that the [regional government review](#), which is being led by **Ken Seiling** and **Michael Fenn**, does not have a presupposed outcome. The wide-ranging review is looking at 82 upper-tier and lower-tier municipalities, including those in Durham, Halton, Muskoka District, Niagara, Oxford County, Peel, Waterloo and York regions, and in Simcoe County. Recommendations were initially supposed to be delivered in early Summer 2019, but that was later delayed to after the fall election.

But the premier told reporters that he's not worried about opinion polls, dismissing the results as coming from the *Toronto Star*, the most-read newspaper in the province, albeit one that he and his late brother **Rob** have feuded with for years.

"That's the *Toronto Star's* numbers. I don't believe the *Toronto Star's* readership polls, I worry about the ones on election day," said the premier. The most recent poll published by the *Star* was not a reader survey, but was instead conducted by professional pollster Corbett Communications. The poll, which was in line with several recent public polls in the field over the past three months, found the premier's net approval rating at a dismal -49 percentage points. Despite the numbers, Ford gave no indication that he'll change. "I can tell you one thing — everywhere I'm going, right across this province, people are saying the same message — keep going," he said.

He then pivoted to the economy, which he claimed is "booming," falsely saying that the previous Liberal government lost 300,000 jobs and his government has added 184,000. In fact, the previous Liberal government saw significant job growth, although 300,000 jobs specific to the manufacturing sector were lost amid industry-wide declines.

The premier also touted the government's moves on pivoting to a needs-based autism policy following months of protest from parents over the previous PC policy. "I think we're doing an incredible, incredible job on the autism file," the premier said. While the government had announced a significant increase in spending on it, the details of how the program will work have not yet been developed and are subject to consultation.

Ford also expressed no apologies for the recent Ontario News Now endorsement of Pelee Island Winery following the sizable PC Party donation from the company's CEO. "I promote every single company, no matter if it's a hardware store or a winery. My job is to sell companies around the world, around Ontario, around Canada and I'll never stop doing that."

The NDP were not immediately available for comment.