



***In the Dark* – Ombudsman’s Remarks**

André Marin

Good morning and thank you for being here, and for tuning in via live webcast. Many of you may remember when we launched this investigation in February 2014. We had a lot of complaints about problems with Hydro One’s billing and customer service – more than 600. We expected to get more complaints. But we didn’t expect to be flooded with thousands in just a few weeks – bringing us to more than 10,700 as of today.

We got complaints about outrageously high bills, and estimated bills that were off by thousands of dollars. We heard from people who received no bills at all for months at a time, and people who received several bills all at once. We heard from customers who felt mistreated and abused when they tried to report these problems to Hydro One.

To handle all of this, we had to act as a sort of call centre ourselves, with teams of staff working long hours to triage them all. We resolved individual issues as they came in, and set up dedicated teams to address specific problems and work with Hydro One. Meanwhile, our Special Ombudsman Response Team investigators dug into the root cause of the problem.

Hydro One’s explanation was simple: When they installed a new customer information system in May 2013, the transition resulted in a lot more glitches than expected. But our investigation determined that the deeper underlying problem was within Hydro One itself.

Like a lot of huge, monopolistic organizations, Hydro One lost sight of its duty to the public. It was so focused on the technical side of its new system, it failed to consider the impact it was having on customers.

When the technical problems sparked a flurry of erroneous bills and a flood of calls from frustrated customers, Hydro One reacted in the worst way possible – with deflection and deception. It minimized the issue, misled its overseers, relied on public relations spin and put its customers last. It pressured its outsourced call centre staff to keep their conversations as short as possible. Customers who had huge sums of money pulled from their bank accounts without warning, or who were hit with outrageous bills, were treated abominably. Many called my office in a panic, worried about being cut off from electricity, taken to a collection agency or even bankrupted over bills they couldn’t understand.

In one case, Hydro One took \$10,000 from the bank account of a senior from Timmins, leaving him on the hook for overdraft charges. It took months before his bill was reduced to just \$800.

In another, it charged an Ottawa man \$11,000 after his meter was changed and five years of electricity he had already paid for was added to his bill. It took him more than a year, 40 calls to the call centre, five complaints to managers, and finally our Office to get the mess sorted out.

There are dozens of cases like this in my report, from all over the province.

I've recommended Hydro One make serious changes to reorient its corporate persona and improve practices across the board – from call centre operations to internal reporting to making bills clearer and easier to read. Hydro One has already told me it will accept every recommendation I've made, and I'll be watching closely to make sure it follows through.

To ensure this, I'm also recommending the government preserve the robust, independent oversight of Hydro One that brought these issues to light in the first place. As you know, the government plans to privatize the utility and install an internal ombudsman instead. I think this report is ample evidence of why that is not good enough, and I am urging it to reconsider, to make sure all of us are not left in the dark again.

I'll now take some questions.