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Ontario Provincial Election 2011 - Comparison of Party Platforms

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The Ontario general election will be held on October 6, 2011 and each of the three main provincial parties have now released their election platforms. Below, we provide an overview and comparison of the key policy proposals advanced by each party: the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party ("PCs"), the Ontario Liberal Party ("Liberals") and the New Democratic Party ("NDP"). The dominant subject across all platforms is health care, with fiscal concerns regarding taxation and government spending also figuring prominently. The interrelated areas of energy and the environment are also a prominent new battleground for the parties, as they debate the merits and costs of power generation using clean and renewable energy sources.

Labour & Employment

The NDP have committed to increasing the minimum wage to \$11 per hour and indexing it to inflation. They will also increase Employment Standards Enforcement by \$3 million per year in order to protect people's rights on the job. The PCs will create 200,000 apprenticeship spaces over four years. The PCs have also committed to amending the manner in which unions interact with their members, by giving individuals the right to a secret ballot in certification votes, introducing a paycheque protection system that will ensure union members are not required to pay fees towards political causes, and requiring unions to publically disclose their financial information.

The PCs will also seek to better integrate foreign trained workers by improving transparency in foreign credentials recognition and by creating a tax credit for employers who sponsor language training. The Liberals have committed to creating a tax credit of up to \$10,000 for businesses to give highly skilled newcomers Canadian work experience.

The Liberals have also committed to funding the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund permanently and creating a new Southwestern Ontario Economic Development Fund.

Taxation

Corporate Tax

The Liberals would continue with their planned corporate tax reductions, which were previously announced and began taking effect in 2010. The previous rate of 14% has been cut to the current 11.5%, with planned cuts continuing until an ultimate rate of 10% is reached on July 1, 2013. The PCs have also promised to drop the corporate rate to 10% by 2013, matching the current regime. The NDP would not proceed with the current plan. Instead, they propose to roll back the provincial rate to the level it was set at prior to the recent cuts (14%), though promising to ensure the rate stays below comparative US levels to ensure no jobs are lost to the United States. These changes by the NDP would not apply to businesses claiming the Manufacturing and Processing Profits Tax Credit, for whom the current rate will be maintained. Both the Liberals and the NDP would reduce the small business tax rate to 4% (from the current 4.5%).

All three parties propose various tax credits aimed at reducing corporate expenses in relation to specific costs. The Liberals and PC both propose measures to reduce barriers to the hiring of foreign-trained skilled immigrants. The Liberals will introduce a tax credit of up to \$10,000 for businesses that hire such individuals, while the PCs will create a tax credit (of up to \$400) for employers who sponsor language training for those already employed. The NDP proposes a 10% tax credit for companies that invest in buildings, machinery, and equipment in Ontario in order to promote job creation in the province. Similarly, the party will introduce a training tax credit for companies that help their staff upgrade their skills.

Sales Tax (HST)

The NDP would make the temporary input tax credit (ITC) restrictions in relation to the provincial portion of the HST permanent. These restrictions currently prohibit large companies and certain financial institutions from claiming credits on certain enumerated goods (vehicles, energy, telecommunication services, and meals and entertainment) for which they would otherwise apply. The restrictions on claiming such

credits are set to begin being phased out as of July 1, 2015, ultimately being fully removed by July 1, 2018. The Liberals and PCs have not made any new announcements regarding the ITC restrictions, presumably going forward with the plan to phase them out.

The Liberals will maintain the Ontario Clean Energy Benefit (a 10% reduction of housing hydro bills to offset the added costs of the HST) through to its planned expiration at the end of 2015. Both the PC and NDP platforms contain promises to permanently remove the provincial portion of the HST (8%) from home hydro bills, however, their method of doing so varies. The NDP would maintain the Ontario Clean Energy Benefit until expiration, at which time the provincial portion of the HST would be removed from such bills. The PCs, on the other hand, promise to remove the provincial portion of the HST from hydro bills immediately. Both the NDP and PCs also promise to remove the HST from home heating bills immediately. The NDP further plans to roll-back the inclusion of HST in gasoline prices, at a rate of 1% per year.

The PC Party promises to eliminate the eco tax introduced by the current government on everyday items (such as light bulbs, batteries, iPods, and laptops).

Personal Income Tax

The PCs are the only party to promise any significant change to personal income taxes. First, they will introduce income sharing that will allow couples to share up to \$50,000. This measure is meant to build on the federal government's Family Tax Cut that would do the same for the federal element of income taxes. While the federal cut is only to be implemented once the federal budget is balanced, the Ontario PCs propose to call on the federal government to implement income sharing at the same time to maximize savings to families.

Additionally, the PCs propose to lower income tax by 5% on the first \$75,000 earned and double the amount of the Caregiver Tax Credit for income-earners who care for a family member in their own home.

Economy

In general, both the PCs and the Liberals are committed to balancing the budget by no later than the 2017-18 fiscal year. The PCs will focus on stopping government subsidies to big corporations, while the Liberals aim to triple the number of successful start-up companies in Ontario by creating incentives to ensure innovative companies have the capital to grow.

The PCs are committed to introducing a Small Business Bill of Rights which will enshrine specific rights for small business, such as red tape reduction, fast and efficient government service standards and a greater ability for small business to bid on government contracts.

A PC government will also appoint a Minister responsible for reducing regulatory burden by a minimum of 30%.

The Liberals have committed to doubling the amount of international trade missions that a Liberal government will lead in an effort to promote economic growth.

Energy

The NDP approach to energy prioritizes affordability for Ontarians; at the core of this policy is controlling electricity prices. Specifically, the Party is proposing consolidating Ontario's electricity bureaucracies to eliminate waste and duplication. By merging aspects of the Ontario Power Authority ("OPA"), Hydro One and the Independent Electricity System Operator ("IESO") into Ontario's publicly-owned generating company, the Party hopes to lower costs and protect consumers. In addition, the NDP is proposing capping CEO compensation within the electrical generation industry to bring Ontario in line with other Canadian jurisdictions. The Party projects that this initiative will save Ontarians \$20 million per year from 2012 to 2016.

While the NDP commits to expanding green energy production in the Province, and recognizes a role for small privately owned producers, public ownership for large scale energy production will be a priority. Furthermore, the Party indicates that it favours supporting alternative forms of energy production to nuclear options. Such alternatives include energy conservation, energy efficiency, renewable energy and natural gas cogeneration.

Similar to the NDP, the PC Party is committed to controlling the cost of Ontario's energy bureaucracy. For example, the Party proposes getting rid of the Ontario Power Authority. In addition, it plans on investing in clean energy production such as natural gas, hydroelectric and nuclear power. While short on specifics, the Party intends to support an open and fair process for sourcing alternative energy such as solar, wind and biomass. Furthermore, the PCs propose ending time-of-use pricing associated with the Province's current use of smart meters.

In addition to the removal of certain charges from home energy bills (outlined under the "Taxes" section above), the PCs also propose appointing a Consumer Advocate within the Ontario Energy Board to exclusively represent consumer interests.

FIT Program

The PCs are also committed to ending the Liberal's feed-in-tariff program ("FIT Program"). While the Party commits to honouring existing contracts, it will discontinue this practice if elected. The platform also calls for the termination of the Province's \$7 billion green energy contract with the Samsung C&T Corporation and the Korea Electric Power Corporation.

At the center of the Liberals' energy platform is a commitment to phasing out coal plants and maintaining the FIT Program initiated as part of the Green Energy Act. The Party projects that the FIT Program will lead to the creation of 50,000 clean energy jobs.

Electric Vehicles

The Liberals are also committed to bringing green energy to Ontario's roads. In particular, the Party aspires to be North America's leading jurisdiction in electric auto manufacturing. In addition, by providing a rebate on new electric vehicles the Liberals intend to accelerate plans to have electric cars represent 5% of all new vehicles by 2020, while investing \$80 million in the charging stations and infrastructure required to support them.

Water

The Liberals have also committed to furthering the *Water Opportunities and Water Conservation Act* by developing innovative, clean water technologies and practices that create clean jobs domestically and clean water for the world.

Agriculture

Both the NDP and the PCs are committed to creating a 'Buy Ontario' food policy that will include increasing market access for Ontario wineries. The Liberals would similarly create a Local Food Act and increase the amount of local food purchased by schools and hospitals. The PCs will deliver a business risk management program and protect supply management for farmers, while the Liberals would keep the business risk management program that they introduced and encourage the federal government to get involved.

The NDP has a number of measures aimed at farmers, including extending funding for the Ontario Marketing Investment Fund for a further three years, funding the planned expansion of the risk management program and undertaking a review of regulatory barriers that put Ontario farmers at a competitive disadvantage. The NDP would further provide relief from municipal taxation and zoning restrictions to encourage on-farm processing and implement a plan that prioritizes family farmers. The NDP is also committed to expanding the incentive program for farmers who set aside and protect land, and an NDP government would provide \$10 million to help farmers accurately measure the value of their stewardship role.

Transportation and Infrastructure

Should they be elected, the PCs commit to investing more than \$35 billion to pay for new infrastructure over their first three years in office and to using innovative technologies to reduce traffic congestion. A complete list of infrastructure projects will be provided online in real time to allow the public to track the progress of the projects. Every Ontario community will receive a share of the existing gas tax for the transportation projects that make the most sense for them. The PCs promise to review the Ontario Government's decision to use a Quebec-based company instead of the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission to refurbish GO Transit rail cars.

The NDP plans to direct the Ontario Energy Board to set a ceiling for gas prices each week. They also commit to sharing the cost of operating transit equally with municipalities, provided the municipalities agree to freeze transit prices at current levels for four years. They will also invest in new transit projects and in upgrades for public transit systems.

The Liberals state that their new long-term infrastructure plan, *Building Together*, will create more jobs for tradespeople, strengthen the economy and help communities large and small to develop and prosper. They will expand public transportation service by delivering full-day, two-way GO train service on all corridors, and will provide a money-back guarantee to GO train customers who experience a 15-minute or longer arrival delay in certain circumstances. The Liberals promise to continue to invest in public transit, building upon the more than \$10.8 billion they have invested since 2003.

Natural Resources and the Environment

The Liberal Party's focus has two major themes: maintaining the status quo, and expanding present programs. As discussed above, they have pledged to maintain the Feed-in-Tariff program, to finish replacing coal fired generation plants, to accelerate plans to have 5% electric cars on the road, and to install the necessary electric vehicle charging stations. They have also pledged to continue to invest in public transportation, and specifically to increase GO Train service.

The Liberals have further promised to continue implementing the *Water Opportunities and Water Conservation Act*, to enact a *Great Lakes Protection Act* and to provide funds to clean the province's beaches and waterway shores. Finally, the Liberals have promised to expand

Ontario's Greenbelt of protected land, while also ensuring mining in the Ring of Fire in Northern Ontario are priorities. The New Democrats have pledged to amend the *Mining Act* to ensure that all mined resources in Ontario are also processed in-province. The PC Party's stated focus is to eliminate eco-taxes on everyday household items such as light bulbs, iPods and laptops. The Party will also close all coal fired plants by 2014, invest an additional \$10 million dollars into provincial parks, and strengthen support for conservation efforts in Ontario's rivers, and for its fish and wildlife.

Northern Ontario

The PC Party has also released a platform specific to Northern Ontario issues. In it, the Party pledges to give local governments more power in developing Crown lands, and to repeal Bill 191 (*The Far North Act*). They have also pledged to harmonize the environmental assessment processes used by the province and the federal government, and to reduce administrative barriers to the mining industry. The party has promised to champion development in the Ring of Fire area for mining, and to ensure mining tax revenues stay in local mining communities of the North. As for the forestry industry, the party pledges to reduce administrative barriers, create a fair tenure system, and to allocate stumpage fees to First Nations communities once the industry is profitable. They have further pledged to streamline the processes used by the Ministry of Natural Resources in regulating hunting, fishing, and natural resource management, and to dedicate all revenues from hunting and fishing licenses to conservation efforts. Finally, the PC Party has promised to open more trails on Crown lands and forestry access roads for public use and enjoyment.

Education

While education is the foundation of the Liberal plan, and of importance to the Conservative party platform, the New Democrats are surprisingly silent on the issue.

Kindergarten

The Liberals will go forward with their implementation of full-day kindergarten for 250,000 children with full enrolment by 2014-15. The PCs also plan to go forward with the full-day kindergarten implementation by 2014, though noting that the program has challenges that need to be addressed and improvements that need to be made. The PCs plan on increasing spending on K-12 education by \$2 billion by the end of their first term, if elected.

Testing and Reporting

The Liberals are committed to improving the numeracy and literacy skills of students by aiming to have at least 75% of students achieving and exceeding the provincial standard. For those students who are struggling, the Liberals plan on providing new summer learning camps for enrichment.

The PCs have pledged to reinstate the fall report card for elementary students, as well as taking steps to prevent bullying in schools. They also promise to work with school board officials to determine if any resources can be diverted into the classroom from the administration of the school boards. They promise to ensure that the funding formula for schools meets the needs of each unique school, community and student.

The PCs want students to have increased access to electronic learning tools such as learn-to-read applications and electronic textbooks. They further pledge to allow parents to view their child's standardized test results online.

Post-Secondary Education

Both the Liberals and PCs promise to create 60,000 more spaces in colleges and universities. In doing this, the PCs promise to increase financial support for middle-class families. Conversely, the Liberals plan to reduce post-secondary costs by continuing to provide grants for lower-income families, in addition to supporting all middle-class families, by providing a 30% post-secondary undergraduate tuition grant. In order to remain eligible for the grant, recipients of the tuition grant must remain in good standing in their undergraduate program. The PCs intend to end the foreign scholarship program for foreign students, leaving more money available for domestic students.

The Liberal Party promises to build three new leading-edge undergraduate campuses in Ontario. In addition, the Liberals propose doubling the length of the Bachelor of Education program for teachers with an emphasis on practical experience. Further, they plan to provide more professional development during the first three years of a teacher's career. The Liberals will continue to tackle student debt through the Ontario Student Opportunities grant, and intend on capping student debt at \$7,300 for each year of undergraduate study. If a student struggles to attain employment or has a low income, loan repayments will be reduced until their income increases. If a student is unable to attain work, their loan payments could be reduced to zero. Finally, the Liberals promise that students who work in the not-for-profit sector will be eligible for an additional six-month interest free grace period after graduation.

Crime

Enforcement and Sentencing

The PCs plan to toughen treatment of criminals by requiring provincial prisoners to work up to 40 hours per week of manual labour. They pledge to use GPS technology to monitor registered sex offenders and other high risk offenders. This monitoring also includes a promise by the PCs to develop a website that lists the names and addresses of registered sex offenders living in Ontario.

The PCs seek to toughen rules on illegal occupations by expanding powers under the *Trespass to Property Act*. They also plan to target fraud (organized crime schemes of auto insurance and welfare fraud) through the creation of a special unit of Crown Attorneys, the Office of Financial Crimes Prosecution.

The PCs have committed to dealing with the sale of illegal tobacco. They will do this by increasing enforcement efforts, including at the US border. They plan to reduce the authorized volume of unmarked tobacco produced on reserves and work with the reserve police agencies and band councils to close down unauthorized cigarette manufacturing and delivery. They also plan on increasing police search and seizure authority relating to tobacco products.

Victim Compensation

The PCs will ensure that the Victims' Justice Fund improves its services and directs all funds to victims. They will also ensure that the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board awards needs-based compensation to victims, who will also be given representation on the board.

The PCs have committed to reforming the justice system, specifically by extending the hours of the busiest Courts in Ontario. They plan to create a provincial registry of houses in Ontario that were previously used as grow ops and meth labs.

The Ontario NDP and Liberal platforms do not make any specific promises with regard to crime initiatives.

Social Assistance

Retirement

The Ontario New Democrats have pledged to improve the current pension system through the strengthening of the Pension Benefits Guarantee Fund. They further pledge that for those Ontarians who do not have a workplace pension, they will develop an Ontario Retirement Plan to provide a benefit pension for those who wish to have one. The New Democrats also want to work with the Federal New Democrats to expand the current Canada Pension Plan benefits.

Social Assistance Benefits

The New Democrats will reduce the clawback of social assistance benefits from people with disabilities when they are transitioning back into employment and promise to ensure that Ontario Works rates keep pace with inflation. The PCs similarly promise to ease the transition of those receiving assistance from Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program into the workforce.

The PCs also want to streamline the welfare system to make it more effective. The PCs will make it a requirement, if elected, for welfare recipients to be residents of Ontario for one year before being eligible to collect benefits. The NDP pledge to follow through on the recommendations of the Commission for the Review of Social Assistance in Ontario, which are expected to be released in 2012. The Liberals also promise to get the experts working on the review of Social Assistance in Ontario, in order to develop policy options. The Liberal Party will work with municipalities, non-profits and developers to create opportunities for affordable housing in addition to setting the next poverty reduction target.

Child Benefits

The Liberals plan on increasing the Ontario Child Benefit that they introduced, from \$1,100 to \$1,300 in 2013.

Government Services, Accountability, and Transparency

The Liberals plan to upload \$2.7 billion in costs from municipalities. The current Liberal Government recently appointed economist Don Drummond to Chair the Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services, which will examine long-term, fundamental changes to the way in which government works. The Liberals plan to build on the work of the Drummond Commission to continue to reform public services.

Government Spending

The Liberal Party has committed to the reduction of the Ontario Public Service by 5% by March 2012 and an additional 1,500 employees by 2014, potentially saving more than \$500 million.

The PC Party plans to save two percent, every year, on government spending (excluding education and healthcare spending), and to launch a special website to give Ontarians the opportunity to help identify areas of wasteful government spending. Government assets and property will be evaluated and possibly privatized and/or sold. The PC Party will use the proceeds to improve patient care and student achievement, or to balance the province's books.

Further, under the PCs, the size of the provincial Cabinet will be reduced by at least 20%, and the Ontario Public Service will shrink as vacant positions go unfilled. The entire Cabinet will have its pay docked if it misses important financial or regulatory goals. The Party also plans to review some 630 different agencies, boards and commissions to ensure they are operating properly; those that are no longer serving their purpose will be closed.

The PC Party will introduce initiatives requiring public sector unions to compete with not-for-profit organizations and private businesses to secure government contracts, where appropriate. It further plans to work with its public sector partners to develop a fair yet fiscally responsible pay and benefits package for public sector workers. It also plans to increase accountability and transparency by requiring arbitrators to explain the reasons for their decisions, and adhere to clear and tight timeframes so that the provincial and local governments can budget accordingly.

Government Transparency

The PCs will introduce the *Truth in Government Act* to expand the scope of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and mandate the public sharing of information, contracts, grants, travel costs, and expenses. The PC Party promises to implement a number of measures aimed at streamlining government services, including increasing government data available to the public, streamlining routine government transactions, extending office hours and co-ordinating underground utilities location.

Finally, the PC Party will outlaw provincial tax hikes that are introduced in the absence of a clear mandate. The new law will not allow for any exceptions or loopholes.

Health Care

Health care features prominently in all three of the major political party platforms. The Liberals have focused on their achievements to date and would continue to increase the level of services provided in our health care system, with a specific focus on homecare for seniors and preventative care to relieve the burden on hospitals. For their part, the Ontario PCs and the New Democrat Party have focused on implementing a patient-centred approach to health care by eliminating unnecessary costs and bureaucracies within the system, while increasing the level of health services provided.

The PCs are the only party to clearly state the amount of money that they would spend on health care related costs, promising to increase annual investments in health by more than \$6 billion by the end of their first term in office.

Local Health Integration Networks

Both the PCs and the NDP are in favour of eliminating the Local Health Integration Networks ("LHINs") created by the Ontario government in 2006, arguing that LHINs are unelected and unaccountable bureaucracies that are ineffective in carrying out their mandate. The NDP is in favour of replacing the LHINs with effective local decision-making, while the PCs simply state that they will redirect the savings from the closures towards patients.

Other Bureaucratic Agencies

In accordance with the broader goal of finding savings in the health care system, both the PCs and NDP have attacked wasteful bureaucratic spending within the health system. The PCs would stop the eHealth program and reduce administration in general, citing the Ministry of Health, public hospitals and Community Care Access Centres as examples of potential targets. The NDP would cap public hospital CEO compensation at twice the Premier's salary, crack down on consultant expenses, and give the Ombudsman oversight of hospital and health spending.

Increased Access to Health Care

All three parties have emphasized the importance of increased access to health care. The Liberals have highlighted the 11,500 nurses that have been hired since they came into office, with the corresponding creation of 25 nurse practitioner clinics. They confirm that they would continue this trend and hire more nurses and train more doctors and other health professionals.

The PCs would encourage health care providers to work collaboratively to meet patients' needs, with a particular focus on under serviced areas. On a broader scale, the PCs plan on increasing the number of doctors by creating additional residency placements for medical students from Ontario who have pursued medical training outside of Canada and who would like to return home to practice.

The NDP have also addressed the issue of health care in underserved communities by proposing the creation of a program to forgive the student debt of new doctors who decide to practice in these communities. The NDP proposes provincial funding for 50 new family healthcare clinics to provide 24 hour healthcare services by 2015, with guaranteed appointments within 24 hours.

Home Care

The Liberals would continue redesigning the primary care and home care system to provide better services, including house calls and online and telephone check-in. They would also offer Personal Support Workers to provide home care to seniors, providing up to 3 million hours of additional care. The Liberals have focused on making it easier for families to care for their loved ones, by proposing the creation of a new Family Caregiver Leave that would give Ontarians up to 8 weeks of job-protected leave to help a family member who is seriously injured or ill. They have also pledged to press the federal government to extend Employment Insurance benefits for those caring for ill family members, and to create a Healthy Home renovation tax credit worth up to \$1,500 annually for home renovations associated with caring for a family member.

The PCs and NDP each address home care, but have chosen to advance significantly different approaches in dealing with the issue. The PCs would offer home care clients the ability to choose to stay with their current home care provider, or pick a new government funded home care provider who better meets the patients' individual needs. On the other hand, the NDP have put forth a plan that includes: funding for an additional 1 million hours of home care over four years, the elimination of waiting lists for home care, and a comprehensive review of home care policy with a goal of creating a new publicly owned and accountable home care system, in an attempt to reduce management and administrative costs by 20%.

Long-Term Care

The PCs and NDP both recognize a need to increase the number of long-term care beds to relieve some of the burden placed on hospitals. The PCs plan on adding 5,000 new beds in addition to the 35,000 renovated beds coming on stream over the next 10 years. For their part, the NDP would eliminate the waitlist for long-term care for those with complex medical needs by building the required number of new beds.

Reducing Emergency Room Wait Times

Citing a need to provide a more patient focused approach to health care, the PCs and NDP would both reduce emergency room wait times in hospitals. The PCs would set specific, measurable emergency room wait time guarantees and make hospital CEOs responsible for delivering on those guarantees, while the NDP would work closely with hospitals to address the underlying causes of backlogs and long wait times in an attempt to cut emergency room wait times in half.

Increased Accountability in Hospitals

The Liberals would create a Health Care Coordinator who would be charged with facilitating care between specialists, family doctors, hospitals and the community to help seniors who have been hospitalized in the previous 12 months. For their part, the PCs would strengthen the mandate of the Ontario Health Quality Council to monitor and report on the performance of Ontario's health care system and to hold hospital CEOs accountable for the quality of care delivered in their hospitals.

Reducing Health Care Related Costs

Both the Liberals and the NDP have emphasized the need to reduce unnecessary health care related costs by keeping Ontarians healthy. The Liberals have emphasized their Smoke-Free Ontario strategy to reduce smoking rates and to prevent the sale of tobacco to minors. They have pledged to prevent costly burdens on our health care system by investing in the prevention and treatment of mental illness, Alzheimer's and dementia. The Liberals have also proposed the creation of a Personalized Cancer Risk Profile to assess people's risk of cancer and to match them to screening programs and other preventative test methods to reduce cancer rates.

Both the Liberals and the NDP have pledged to tackle child obesity. The Liberals would create a Council on Childhood Obesity to reduce obesity rates in children by 20% within 5 years, starting with a healthy snack program in all elementary schools and an increase in the Children's Activity Tax Credit to \$100 per child. The NDP would also tackle child obesity by ensuring mandatory physical education in secondary schools, banning advertising of junk food aimed at children, and making calories labelling on menus in large chain restaurants the law. The NDP also proposes to eliminate the high fees for ambulance services, and would make the cost of prescription drugs a priority in the upcoming national health accord negotiations.

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