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Public sector salaries inflate budget

THERE was some undeniably good news last week regarding Ontario's sorry finances. Though the provincial deficit remains an eye-popping \$13.5 billion, it has dropped a full \$1 billion since Premier Doug Ford's Conservatives took office last June. Barring any disagreement from the province's Financial Accountability Office (FAO) or Auditor-General Bonnie Lysyk (both worthwhile offices, by the way), the province might be on track to shave off some of the rest — say, by a third — before the next provincial election three years from now.

For the record, the FAO puts the deficit figure at \$12.3 billion, so we can perhaps assume the province is in the ballpark with its own figure and not trying to pull the wool over our eyes. No matter how you slice, it's an absolute ton of dough when you do the math.

The downside, obviously, is that many things will have to give to reach the goal of getting the province back into the black. If you're currently working for an obscure provincial department that nobody has heard about, and whose contributions to the province are negligible at best, then you might want to start polishing up your resume.

The easiest way to get out of the red quickly is to trim payroll, although that approach is not very imaginative and is often disastrous for those who toil in middle-of-the road jobs.

Despite the financial pinch soon to be felt by some — parents with autistic children, and college and university students — many are prepared to give the Ford government the benefit of the doubt. We have faith in Vic Fedeli in particular, Ford's capable finance minister, simply because the numbers are so darn scary, especially when you consider who is going to inherit this sea of red ink if the situation is not corrected sooner than later — our children and grandchildren.

This is undoubtedly why Kathleen Wynne's Liberals were so unceremoniously punted last June; the perception that Wynne was prepared to keep rowing, aimlessly, through that never-ending sea.

It's the deficit — the gap between what the province takes in, and what it pays out for services — that gets all the attention, especially at election time.

But here's something else worth thinking about: the annual interest alone on the province's long-term debt of \$346 billion is a whopping \$12.5 billion. Again, that's just for interest, every year. It's heart-breaking to think that so much of our money goes out the window to lenders, when surely it could be used for so much good. Kenora desperately needs a new hospital, Thunder Bay could use a new hockey rink, remote First Nations need thousands of new homes — the shopping list is never ending.

Some might ask: How on earth did we get so deeply in debt? As Fedeli ponders what programs to cut, surely the elephant in the room is public-sector salaries, particularly in senior management.

Last week Energy, Northern Development and Mines Minister Greg Rickford raised a red flag, saying the province refused to pay Hydro One's head-honcho an eye-popping \$2.75 million. Good for him, you say. But wait for it — Rickford said the utility's CEO can still rake in \$1.5 million!

What's wrong with this picture? Fifty years ago, workers at a large factory might have earned \$10,000 a year. The plant's senior manager might have earned \$30,000, which might translate into, say, about \$150,000 in today's money.

Today, the heads of school boards with declining enrollments make at least that much, as do some of their senior staffers. Similar unsustainable pay scales can be found in colleges, hospitals, utility boards, justice departments and a host of other provincial agencies.

Some of those we've never heard of. But, by golly, we can do the math.

Readers' submissions are welcome at letters@chroniclejournal.com, by fax at 343-9409, or mail to 75 S. Cumberland St., P7B 1A3. Please include name, address, phone number.



NANCY & SLUGGO

Bengali language movement resonates in all tongues

BY NAHID ANEE

FEB. 21 is recognized as International Mother Language Day, chosen because of the tragic yet catalyzing events that transpired on that day in 1952, in Bangladesh. The origin of this day is engraved in the hearts of the Bengali language speakers from the country of Bangladesh because of the events of that day.

The language movement is an historical part of Bangladesh. In 1947 India gained independence from Great Britain, but it was divided into two parts according to predominant religions of the inhabitants and Pakistan was born on the world map. One thing is mentionable here that Pakistan had two parts; one is East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and other is West Pakistan (present Pakistan). The former government of Pakistan decided Urdu would be their state language, but the people of East Pakistan mostly spoke Bengali. It was an irony of fate that the rulers of Pakistan tried to impose Urdu as mother tongue instead of Bengali. However, economic and cultural frictions between East and West Pakistan kept on building.

On Feb. 13, 1948 at Karachi, the capital of Pakistan, it was proposed that the assembly members would have to speak either Urdu or English at the Parliament. The fact was totally ignored that more than 80 per cent of Pakistani population are from East Pakistan with Bengali as their mother tongue.

From 1948 until 1952 on different occasions, the government of Pakistan tried to force Urdu to be the only official language of both East and West Pakistan.

This increased the level of frustration among the people of East Pakistan, and they had lost their faith in the former government of West Pakistan.

Finally the fire was ignited by Khwaja Najimuddin, chief minister of East Bengal on Jan. 27, 1952, when he repeated that Urdu would be the state language of both East and West Pakistan.

Instantly there was a negative reaction to this speech in East Pakistan and students responded with slogan "Rashtrabhasha Bangla Chai" which means 'we want



ONE CITY, MANY VOICES

Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

Bengali as our state language' in English. After that, on Jan. 30, 1952, a strike was observed at Dhaka university. On Jan. 31, representatives of different cultural and political organizations held a meeting and the committee decided to call a peaceful strike on Feb. 21, 1952, organizing processions and demonstration.

Teachers and thousands of students from schools and colleges of Dhaka city assembled on the university campus. Suddenly, the former Pakistani police fired tear gas shells on the students. In order to control the situation, they opened fire upon the crowd. Abdul Jabbar, Abdul Barkat (a masters student of political science), Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin and many other people were killed. A nine-year-old boy named Ohullah was also killed. Many others were also injured and arrested.

At the spot where students had been killed, a memorial was created



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Floral tributes mark the Martyr's Monument, or Shaheed Minar, in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

on Feb. 23, 1952.

After the liberation of Bangladesh on Dec. 16, 1971, this language movement was being observed as Language Movement Day or Shaheed Dibosh, or Martyrs' Day. On this day, people lay floral wreaths at the Martyr's Monument in memory.

The Bengali language movement represented the quest for equality, human rights, struggle against the oppressive Pakistani regime, and for emancipation. On Nov. 17, 1999, UNESCO proclaimed Feb. 21 to be the International Mother Language Day and it was first observed globally on Feb. 21, 2000.

The resolution to proclaim International Mother Language Day by UNESCO was first suggested by Rafiqul Islam, a Bangladeshi Canadian living in Vancouver. Also, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages to promote unity in diversity and international understanding through multilingualism and multiculturalism. On May 16, 2009, it called on its member states to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by people of the world.

I grew up in a very culturally active family, I was involved with local cultural community to celebrate our language with pride and joy. On Feb. 21, we would go for Provat Ferri — an early morning procession to the monument. Everyone paying respect at the monument would sing "Amar Bhai Er Rokte Rangano Ekushe February, Ami Ki Vulite Pari," the opening line of the so-called 'Song of the 21st' that translates as 'how could I forget 21st February with my brothers' bloody death.'

Being away from my country didn't make me lose touch with my amazing culture, we have a small Bangladeshi community here in Thunder Bay who proudly observe International Language Day every year. We are trying to pass on our history to our new generation, and educate our community about this aspect of our culture.

Nahid Anee is a social worker at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre and a member of the Bangladeshi community in Thunder Bay.

Onley's long road to accessibility a lesson for us all

BY MARTIN REGG COHN

WE ALL complain, habitually and self-pityingly, about punishing snowfalls. Especially lately. But for David Onley, the snow banks and other barriers never truly melt away.

For a time, as Ontario's lieutenant-governor, the obstacles were magically cleared away. Enveloped by an entourage, cocooned by bodyguards, he surmounted the roadblocks. An elevator was installed in the vice-regal suite at Queen's Park, and a ramp was retrofitted in front of the legislature. Thanks to the superhuman powers emanating from the Crown, Onley not only made his way, but also paved the way for other wheelchair-bound Ontarians.

Ensnared in his scooter, chauffeured in a specially outfitted van, backed by his band of official enablers, his disability — or inaccessibility — seemingly diminished. But after a lifetime spent grappling with the fallout from a childhood bout of polio, Onley always knew it was only a matter of time before he was on his own again.

Now, Onley no longer speaks for the Crown. But he still has a voice.

He is using it to describe what he



PROVINCIAL AFFAIRS

sees at ground level — and getting a hearing from the powers above. Appointed last year by Queen's Park to conduct a formal review of accessibility in Ontario, he has just submitted his findings to the Progressive Conservative government.

There is still a stunning disconnect for the disabled, and a growing gap in how the able-bodied perceive the reality of inaccessibility.

Onley wouldn't tip his hand about the details of his report, which will be shared with the public later. But he didn't disguise his disappointment.

"We still have a very inaccessible society, a built environment that is very inaccessible," he told me. "The people who believe it's accessible are members of the able-bodied population."

A longtime believer in the original legislation, which passed with all-

party support, he now fears that its 2025 target for full accessibility will go unfulfilled.

Onley points a finger not only at politicians but bureaucrats, architects, developers, administrators and inspectors who fail to do their duty to the disabled. And all of us. For the disabled are us, sooner or later. The older we get — and our population is aging fast — the more likely we are to find ourselves in their shoes: First with canes, then walkers, then wheelchairs.

Eligible, ultimately, for those special parking permits in our windshields that confer priority access to reserved spots. Paradoxically, the advent of priority parking has helped to distort the reality of disability today in Ontario. Those signs are ubiquitous, serving as a symbol of access and open doors. But the typical reserved parking spot is a dead end — leading only to barriers that leave the disabled out in the cold at most malls and public buildings.

"It's shocking the number of places that are fully inaccessible and yet out front, you'll see a wheelchair sign," he said. "It depends on how angry you want to be."

The problem isn't just the false signal it sends to the disabled on the

spot, but the facade it conveys to society at large that access is everywhere.

Onley is especially vexed by the lack of foresight from the self-styled visionaries who make up the architectural community. He points to new buildings that win architectural awards but get a failing grade for accessibility, which should surely disqualify them from recognition.

Over the years, I had watched Onley's handlers help him navigate unforeseen obstacles and predictable impediments. This week, I watched him flying solo again, when he wended his way to a Ryerson University democracy forum I hosted for Onley and his successor as lieutenant-governor, Elizabeth Dowdeswell.

Without government officials to smooth the way, it fell to Ryerson organizers to ensure he didn't stumble on his journey.

In preparation, Onley patiently walked me through his detailed checklist to overcome any obstacles. Yes, they had a ramp leading onto the stage, but had they verified its dimensions to ensure his scooter could mount the slope? Was the platform wide enough for him to pre-position without toppling over? Any stairs along the way leading to the campus venue?

Where was the nearest parking? Was it underground or at least sheltered? Was there an underground passageway leading to the event? If not, what about the weather? Who would shovel any snow in the way?

Presciently, as it turns out, Onley reminded me of the perils of ice and snow for someone in a scooter. Even a few centimetres can gum up his wheels, and a serious snow bank is a dead end.

Even before Toronto's unexpected 20-centimetre snowfall that came after our chat, Onley had confided he typically refuses all winter speaking engagements — too unpredictable and insurmountable. But he was making a rare exception to be with his successor, Dowdeswell.

Practiced in both logistics and logic, Onley made it onstage without a hitch, and expounded on vice-regal arcana without a verbal stumble.

While it's always an education hearing him talk about the abstractions of our constitution, he also delivers enduring lessons on the reality of inaccessibility.

Martin Regg Cohn is a columnist for The Toronto Star. Email him at mcohn@thestar.ca or find @reggcohn to follow him on Twitter.