

Walkom: Ontario waiting for the Don Drummond apocalypse ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

In the genre known as theatre of the absurd, there are few plays more famous than Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Wildly funny in its disjointedness yet vaguely menacing in its possibilities, it features characters of uncertain identity anticipating the arrival of a being who, while always imminent, never quite shows up.

In the theatre of the absurd known as Ontario politics, the sequel might be titled *Waiting for Don Drummond*.

Don Drummond is both everywhere and nowhere. Technically an economist under contract to recommend efficiencies to Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government, he has been transformed, through no particular fault of his own, into a mythic figure - one whose presence overshadows all at Queen's Park.

Will the government make huge spending cuts? Will it fire vast chunks of its workforce and contract out their jobs? Will it squeeze hospital budgets and other medicare services until the pips squeak? Whip into shape those lazy university academics and replace high school teachers with iPhones?

McGuinty and his finance minister Dwight Duncan don't know. How could they? They can't know until Don Drummond speaks. They have left everything to him. He is their Delphic oracle.

Until he pronounces - maybe this month, maybe later - even the opposition Conservatives and New Democrats don't know what to oppose.

The media write vaguely of procedural squabbles crippling legislative business but my guess is that the real reason why so little happens at Queen's Park is that Don Drummond, in all his fullness, has not yet materialized.

From time to time, thanks largely to the energy of my Star colleague Martin Regg Cohn, some of Don Drummond's more epigrammatic thoughts are channelled to the general public.

Thus we know Don Drummond's views of the McGuinty government's fiscal plans ("the numbers don't add up") and what he thinks the reaction to his proposed solutions will be ("lots of anger").

What else do we know?

First, he is not merely Don or Drummond. He is Don Drummond. Just as Cher uses just one name, Don Drummond is best identified by two.

Second, he really does exist. I have met him. He is quite polite and, for a man burdened with the singular responsibility of deciding which provincial public services should live or die, remarkably down to earth.

Don Drummond is usually identified as a former TD Bank chief economist. Far more important is the fact that he once worked as a senior bureaucrat in the federal department of finance.

Department of finance officials are charged with scaling back the spending plans - some wise, some ludicrous - cooked up by elected politicians. That is their job. And unless Don Drummond was a very unusual finance bureaucrat, I suspect he still retains in his DNA a somewhat jaundiced view of government spending.

He is also, of course, an orthodox economist. And it is the rare neo-classically trained economist who doesn't hold some affection for the virtues of the free market and all that this entails, from contracting out to speed-up to wage flexibility (also known as union-busting).

What will Don Drummond say when the wait is finally over? We don't know the specifics. But his musings to columnist Cohn, with their suggestions of a final reckoning for past fiscal wickedness, sound rather like the more fearsome parts of the Bible's Book of Revelations.

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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