

Drummond Commission: Taking Ontario out of commission ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

If you are looking for evidence of class collusion you've come to the right place. Last spring, Premier Dalton McGuinty put a banker in charge of examining Ontario's public services and asked him to recommend ways to decrease government spending. While the official report has yet to be released, drafts reveal that it proposes deep funding cuts to social programs, an overhaul of health care and education, and the sale of public services.

Don Drummond, a former executive and chief economist at TD Bank (a major investor in Public-Private Partnership schemes in Ontario) is heading what has become known as the Drummond Commission. The recently retired financier has been instructed to only consider strategies for cutting costs, not methods of raising revenue. Drummond must have been delighted by the challenge, as he has already authored a number of reports calling for the privatization of social services, and currently opines such views on the boards of various pro-privatization organizations.

Meanwhile, the Ontario government has failed to open up the process to public input, failed to establish legislative committees on the topic, and failed to ensure the inclusion of pre-budget hearings.

This is not to say that McGuinty will adopt all 400 recommendations of the Commission into his 2012 budget. Rather, Drummond's gloomy economic forecast and extreme proposals will likely be used to scare Ontarians into accepting a milder but no less callous plan. Using the Commission results as leverage, the Liberal party can declare that at least some of the proposed changes are necessary to ensure a balanced budget through to 2017-2018.

Lost in the discussion are some fundamental questions: Are balanced budgets an absolute necessity in the midst of economic recovery? Could governments be spending more to create jobs, boost demand, and spur economic growth, not to mention helping those most affected by the downturn? Does privatizing public programs lead to more efficient and cheaper services or do they in fact lead to inferior and more expensive ones? Given that corporate tax cuts do not lead to increased investment but result in deficits, should the province keep cutting them? If deficits must be reined in, perhaps the solution lies in reforming the tax system towards a more progressive model, yielding ample funding for much needed public services.

Responding to the absence of debate and information surrounding the Commission, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and the Public Services Foundation of Canada (PSFC) have partnered up to launch an alternative study: the Commission on Quality Public Services and Tax Fairness. This Commission is undertaking public hearings in 12 cities across the province to raise awareness about the report, its expected recommendations, and its potential consequences on the people of Ontario. Guest speakers include community leaders, academics, providers and clients of public services, and others. Paired with the hearings are town halls in which citizens have a chance to express their views and concerns. The forums began in Kingston on January 5 and will wrap up in Sault Ste. Marie on February 14, after which the Commission will produce a report of its findings

The assemblies have been well attended so far, from 25 to over 100 people in some cities. Toronto's hearing took place on January 30, and featured prominent speakers such as Hugh Mackenzie of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and Toronto City Councillor Adam Vaughan. The evening town hall was moderated by Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Chair), OPSEU regional vice president Nancy Pridham, and journalist and best-selling author Linda McQuaig. Over 150 people attended, 20 of whom spoke out about the potential cuts. We heard impassioned speeches on existing problems in communities, the need for increased funding for public programs, the dreadful consequences of public service cuts (especially for low-income families, First Nations communities, and people with disabilities), the continued detrimental effects of the Mike Harris cuts, increasing inequality in the province, and the problems with for-profit service provision.

...As we have seen in the last few years, austerity measures have been met with strong resistance around the world. Over 20,000 protested the 2010 G20 in Toronto, resulting in the largest mass arrest in Canadian history. As austerity agendas were implemented the world over, protest and uprisings began to foment across Europe, throughout North Africa, and the Arab World. Internationally and in Canada, the Occupy movement took over public spaces in opposition to rising inequality and obscene corporate influence over state policies. Just recently in Toronto, for example, Stop the Cuts, Labour, and community groups mobilized and successfully blocked most of Mayor Rob Ford's budget cuts.

The Ontario Liberals can expect the same resistance. We will be taking the streets to show McGuinty and Drummond that we mean what we say: the 1 per cent can no longer make decisions for the 99 per cent.

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