



Clarion Call



“Government For the People”

Mad River Institute for Political Studies

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Ending the ‘Acceptable’

In Canada, we have something called ‘parliamentary privilege’. It was created in Britain, then exported with the Westminster system of government, to permit Members of Parliament, while in the House of Commons’ chamber, to speak freely without fear of being sued for slander.* The intent was to allow MPs to make charges of malfeasance where the proof might be unsubstantiated or weak, but investigation was warranted. However, over time, this prerogative has been perverted to make it a weapon of slur and innuendo, without penalty to those misusing it. The absolute nature of this privilege must end.

As the level of decorum in Parliament has declined over the last two decades or so, and given the ban on personal attacks, it has

* The only restraint on parliamentary privilege is that legislators are barred from using unparliamentary language, such as “liar” or “crook”. As well, there is to be no swearing.

become commonplace for generalized abuse to take the place. For example, prior to the last election, then Conservative leader Stephen Harper accused the Liberal government of being “involved in a massive corruption ring using organized crime to defraud taxpayers”. Of course, this was in reference to the sponsorship scandal. Mr. Harper had no evidence to make this inflammatory charge. It went along with an earlier comment that all Liberals are corrupt. However, because his accusation was directed at the party as a whole and not an individual, it was acceptable Parliamentary

conduct.

Also acceptable was the now-Prime Minister’s recent suggestion that Stéphane Dion and the Liberal members had a greater “passion” for Taliban prisoners than for Canadian soldiers. Given the overtones of treason, this came across as quite offensive. Perhaps just as bad is that this behaviour is also considered administratively conscionable.

Yet even though most sniping is now generalized in target, the reality is, despite the House rules, veiled attacks can be made on individuals. Prime Minister Harper accused two Liberal MPs of putting their husbands on boards when they were Cabinet ministers, which would have been completely unethical. However, he could not say as much, because of the use of unparliamentary language. He said Lucienne Robillard, when Immigration minister in the mid-1990s, appointed her then husband to the Immigration and Refugee Board. In fact, he had been appointed by the previous Tory government and Robillard actually declined to re-appoint him. In the case of Marlene Jennings, her husband was appointed to a board prior to her being elected in 1997. Mr. Harper never corrected his statement. Why not? Because he didn’t need to. Parliamentary privilege covers it.

This is wrong, and destructive. And we’re not saying the Prime Minister is alone in this. Far from it. (He is, however, now apparently

the House ‘bad boy’ and good for the most egregious examples.) Canadians are disgusted by the antics of too many of our elected representatives. They are being driven away from the electoral process by the overbearing cynicism politicians show for the system, and their contemptuous conduct toward each other and for the intelligence of regular people. Voters watch the “show” and wonder why these alleged leaders act like juvenile delinquents.

So what is to be done? Well, what of the original principle, to charge misconduct where it may have occurred? This could be done without the power of accusation being inviolable. First of all, any charge would have to be specific, and would have to be aimed at an individual. No longer would it be acceptable to smear a whole political faction. However, any accusation would have to happen without the “alliteration” that now usually occurs. For example, one MP could charge another of “accepting campaign contributions above the legal limit” without saying the member is “corrupt” or has “stolen” public money.

Before a charge could be made, however, it should have to first be certified by the Office of the Ethic’s Commissioner. Legal advice could be given on the substance of the charge of wrongdoing. This would not guarantee the accusation was accurate, just that there was sufficient real evidence for concern, and that it was phrased within acceptable parliamentary language. It would guarantee any accusation was not slander.

However, this would not be mandatory. If an MP so chose to make an uncertified charge, he/she would open themselves to the accusation of slander, if it proved incorrect. This would be a powerful incentive to make certain what one was saying was within the realm of reason before

making the accusation.

If such a change was made to parliamentary privilege, none of Mr. Harper’s incendiary accusations noted above would likely ever have been made. In fact, the Prime Minister’s reputation for having a short fuse and vengeful temper might well be much tamer than it is presently if he was not in the position to make absurd, puerile assaults on people he doesn’t like.

The basic problem with parliamentary privilege is that it gives the absolute freedom to commit a specific kind of crime and get away with it completely. The urge to use this immunity must be overwhelming. Imagine a 12-year-old schoolyard bully who has a ‘get out of trouble’ card for everything he does. That’s the case with our Parliamentarians. They have the ‘absolute privilege’ to say what they want, with impunity. That’s wrong.



Ontario's \$100,000 club

Almost 34,000 Ontario civil servants and employees at Crown corporations, colleges and universities, hospitals, and municipalities earned more than \$100,000 in 2006, an increase of more than 6,500 workers, or 24%. While this may not be seen as a huge number, given hundreds of thousands of civil servants, it is a lot when considering an average Ontarian earns about \$33,000 per year.

Civil servants, most notably those earning the highest wages, have seen their pay escalate significantly over the past decade, a condition not shared by average people. Why? This has become the era when comparisons between upper-level public and private sector wages have become common. Unfortunately, this relationship is wrong.

Private sector businesses create wealth. However, the public sector (government) does not create wealth. In fact, it exists to tax private sector wealth to offer people services the private sector cannot or will not. Even if it is for the public good, it reduces societal wealth.

The pay of private sector employees comes from private sector wealth, and is financed by this wealth creation. However, the salaries of public sector employees come from a portion of the amount this wealth is reduced by taxation. As a result, it is a fallacy that public sector wages should be competitive with those in the private sector. They must be fair but the more they increase, the more societal wealth is lost.

Another 'common sense' truism is that good people won't work in public service unless they receive competitive wages. The 'best and brightest' will avoid public sector work because they can make more in private

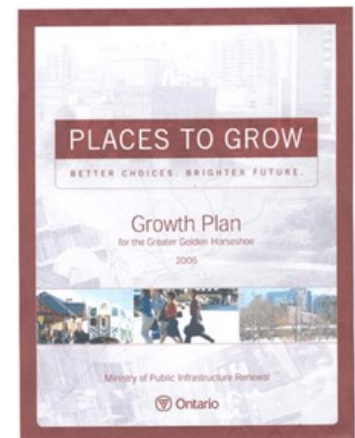
business. So what of all those who came before who worked in government? Were they the left-over 'slag' to the industrial 'steel'? Hardly.

As unpopular as it will be in certain circles, public sector employment should not pay as well as in the private sector because these workers do not create the wealth necessary to pay themselves.

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Ontario government wins awards for 'Places to Grow'

The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe has won the 2007 Canadian Institute of Planners' Award for Planning Excellence in the category of Re-urbanization. The award is given to an innovative initiative that enhances the social, economic, and environmental well-being of a community.



This comes after the plan also won the Daniel Burnham Award for a Comprehensive Plan from the American Planning Association, last December. It is given to the plan that best illustrates progress, community benefit, and contribution to the advancement of the planning profession. It was the first non-American plan to win.

The Mad River Institute for Political Studies is pleased to have participated in the creation of the Greater Golden Horseshoe plan and the *Places to Grow Act*.



OUR VIEW

Failures

It is the job of politicians to set policy on a variety of issues, then oversee their implementation and management. It is the job of bureaucrats to see these policies are implemented and managed as intended. Yet it is the failures of both that lead many ordinary people to hold public servants in contempt.

Public servants must think comprehensively, not just react when issues arise.

A multi-car pile-up on Highway 401 near Cobourg kills two and sends 11 to hospital – not, however, to the regional trauma centre, Kingston General Hospital. It's intensive care unit had been filled for months with many of the patients in need of non-existent chronic care.

A young man in need of long-term assistance is facing a queue of years for a place to live, though his aging parents will soon be unable to look after him, because government has failed to see to it the infrastructure exists.

Public servants must act within the rules, but recognize the rules do not fit all situations, or are often just officious. It is also not for them to interpret the rules as they see fit.

A woman waiting for her passport receives a letter requiring her to have her photo retaken because she's wearing black

clothing, even though there is no stated rule against wearing black.

Another person must resubmit their passport application because an 'l' is not dotted.

Public servants must treat people with respect, not with abuse or an indifference that can be irritating or even cruel.

A farmer asks a government inspector about his favouring a proposed gravel pit on a neighbouring property. The official tells him, "you have no business questioning me".

A man has been in a hospice for three weeks, in the final stage of cancer. His wife receives a call asking her to come get him. "He isn't dying fast enough."

Public servants must get things done with efficiency and skill.

A 'live birth' form is mailed. The paper needed to apply for a birth certificate is returned within one week. Two years later, a form with nearly identical information is sent in. It takes ten weeks to process. An official laughs that 'one week' was "years ago".

An old man with dementia waits four years on a list for long-term care. He finally gets in because his condition has deteriorated enough he jumps to the front of the queue. He dies days later.

These are true examples of the failures of government. They are the failures of politicians. They are the failures of bureaucrats. They are the failures that affect, and alienate, regular people. These are the failures that must stop.

Our Philosophy

As its basic principles, the Mad River Institute for Political Studies, its directors, officers, and members pledge that it, and they, will work to:

1. promote the “public good” through the strengthening of the public nature of government
2. have public servants recognize their inherent responsibilities to citizens
3. create more equity in politics through the expansion of democratic measures
4. have government recognize its inherent responsibility to act directly to help those citizens who need assistance
5. have public servants adopt higher standards of conduct for themselves and all society
6. have public servants recognize their inherent responsibilities in the expenditure of tax dollars while still delivering needed public services
7. have public servants consider more innovative and original ideas to deal with problems
8. assist the public in better understanding the political process and their place in it, as well as the consequences of their political decisions.

It is our belief that people must begin to take greater charge of their own political affairs, and demand more responsibility and accountability from politicians and government for their actions. That is our *raison d’être*. We want to act as an observer, critic, and teacher of government and politics, and try to promote political activity amongst the public by improving the efficacy, accountability, and responsibility of government.



For us, we are in our early days. It is most important we gain members, both for the legitimacy of our cause and for our finances. If you’re not already a member and you think the Institute is on the right track, then please consider joining us. Our basic membership is just \$20.

If you’re already a member, please consider a small donation to help offset the costs of ongoing operations, such as advocating our goals, our educational programmes like PEAR, and our everyday expenses, which we keep as low as we can.

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Please enroll me as a member of the Mad River Institute for Political Studies. I pledge to assist the Institute in its work to further its stated goals.

Name:

Mailing Address:

Telephone:

Fax:

E-mail:

Date: Signature:

Please circle your desired level of membership:
Basic / Gold / Platinum / Diamond

We require your permission, as per the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act to collect and keep personal information about you, such as what is contained in this form. Please check this box if you consent to this. Be assured that, to protect your privacy, the Mad River Institute will never voluntarily share your information with any outside individuals, organizations, business, or government.

This membership is good for a period of one (1) year. It can be paid in cash, cheque, or money order. Please make cheque or money order payable to:

Mad River Institute for Political Studies

Please mail to:

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Saving the Environment with a Commuter Tax

At the risk of being labeled ‘traitors’ or ‘devils’, we think it’s time to consider the unmentionable, up-to-now ... a tax on the distance people drive, what we will call a ‘commuter tax’. As a group that works to modify or reduce taxes, it feels odd to propose a new one. However, given the importance of the goal, saving humankind on this planet, the price to be paid seems small indeed.

Taxes are never something to be desired. If we could all live without having to pay them, it would be nirvana. However, in our society, we have decided that certain levels of taxation are reasonable in seeking the greatest good for the greatest number. As part of this, we also accept that some taxes do act to modify behaviour, such as on cigarettes.

That is the point with our suggestion of a commuter tax, a levy aimed at reducing environmental damage from automobile exhaust, and paying for it with money from those who insist on doing the most driving.



In our opinion, urban sprawl has become a leading factor in environmental damage. The best way to tackle it is for a tax that tries to convince those who travel the farthest to seek housing closer to work, or work closer to their home. It could also be an incentive to car pool, take the train or tele-commute (where possible). This should mean greater intensification in more urban areas and, perhaps, the movement of some business to more suburban areas or rural settlement areas, which could make them more fiscally-viable municipalities. Just as importantly, it should see a decline in the pollution that comes from automobile exhaust, such as carbon monoxide and

dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and unburned hydrocarbons.

The commuter tax would consist of:

- each family owning an automobile being permitted 20,000km/year without being taxed
- if each owner, rather than family, was permitted 20,000km/year, then much of the tax could be avoided with a second car, e.g. car #1 travels 50,000km/year (\$13,500 in tax); but if #2 is added and the mileage is split between the two (25,000km each), then the tax would drop to \$1,000 for each vehicle
- clearly, with the more cars one family owns, there is a greater likelihood of surpassing the 20,000km limit. While this might seem unfair, more cars presumably create more pollution, so this could actually go a long way to limit the gases emitted
- it might be suggested it would be better to apply this to each owner, with a significantly reduced limit of perhaps 10,000km/year. However, this would weigh heavily on poorer (especially working) people, most of whom can only afford one car (if even one)

Beyond 20,000km, the tax would be as follows:

| Kilometres/year | Tax/kilometre above 20,000km |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 20,001 - 25,000 | 20¢ |
| 25,001 - 30,000 | 25¢ |
| 30,001 - 35,000 | 30¢ |
| 35,001 - 40,000 | 35¢ |
| 40,001 - 45,000 | 40¢ |
| 45,001 - 50,000 | 45¢ |
| Over 50,000 | 50¢ |

Examples:

A family driving 19,500km in a year would pay \$0.00.

A family driving 26,232km in a year would pay \$1,558.00.

A family driving 35,005km in a year would pay \$5,251.75.

A family driving 48,766km in a year would pay \$12,944.70.

A family driving 72,111km in a year would pay \$26,055.50.



So, if someone was commuting from Barrie to Toronto at 184km per day, 5 days per week and 49 weeks per year, the tax applied would be \$11,286.00 (and that does not include any general use). Over 30 years, this would effectively add \$338,580 to the price of a house. If Barrie was chosen because a home cost \$257,500 and a comparable Toronto house was \$445,000, then the Barrie property will actually end up being at least 34% more expensive, not including the mortgage interest difference and the cost of probably at least two extra cars. Thus, the financial incentive to commute is eliminated.

Even for someone living much closer, this tax could make people rethink their contribution to urban sprawl. For someone travelling daily from Newmarket to Toronto (96km round-trip), with no general use, they

would be facing an annual charge of \$704. If the vehicle had 2,600km per year in general use, the tax would rise to \$1,530. Over 30 years, that would add up to \$45,900.

For the so-called 'road warrior', they would be financially damaged. For a commuter, by car, from London to Toronto, a 370km round-trip, they would pay \$90,650 a year. If they could physically stand to make this drive for 30 years, it would cost this person \$2,719,500.

How would it be paid? Every time we renew our auto permits, we must pass along the mileage to the government. The charge would be calculated and levied at this point. It would probably be fair to allow installment payments for those facing huge bills. (A similar tax would apply to truckers, though the scale would be different, as it would be for anyone operating cleaner diesel vehicles.)

There are two theories that could be attached to a commuter tax. The first would be that this is not intended as a new source of income, and it should be offset as much as possible. For example, depending on revenue levels, fees for drivers and automobile licensing could be dropped.

A second theory is the tax revenue could be used for programmes to promote 'green' pursuits, like saving natural areas (though this could be more simply and cheaply handled



through regulation) and assisting farmers to preserve their land, rather than sell it to developers as a retirement kitty. The choice of which, or a combination, would be up to those in government.

Our proposition of a commuter tax will not be popular. No 'sin' tax is popular ... but that is what this is. Urban sprawl is robbing us of our health, our food, and the security of all those who come after us. It must be stopped.