

Easy Targets

A critical review
of the campaign
to destroy the value
of public services



Nobody

likes

to be a

target.

But, we probably should have expected it.

Once the-powers-that-be decided to make the public sector the root of all evil, we became easy targets? After all, we're public service workers.

We're the ones who are all supposed to be underworked and overpaid. Thatcher, Reagan and Mulroney all said so. Klein, Harris and Tobin all said so. The newspapers, radio and TV all said so. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for years and years and years, they all said so.

What chance did we have? We became easy targets.

But we weren't the only targets. In fact, public service workers weren't even the primary target. We came second. The first target was the public sector itself --not only in the concrete, but also in the abstract. The whole concept of a public sector as an idea and an ideal was challenged.

Pointed questions were raised about the overall value of government itself and of public services in general.



The strategy was clear: Convince us we had been wrong to build ourselves the kind of Canada we had. Shake our fundamental faith in the value of a strong public sector. Convince us all we would be better off letting private business watch over us and watch out for us. Then take it all apart and divvy up the spoils.

In other words, they had to convince us to cut off our nose to spite our face.

It was to be government by amputation, built on a phantom public sector, more a memory than a reality.

This was not the smart thing to do. And deep down we all kind of knew it.

That's the really amazing part. How we all more or less went along with something we all knew in our bones to be so wrong.

But it's not the most important part. The most important part now is that we find a way to sort through all the bumpf and baloney, all the claims and the counter claims, all the posturing and pontificating and wedge down to the truth of things.

Each of us needs a firm place to stand and say whether or not public services have a value that must be respected and restored.

Finding that firm place is not that hard. For us it comes down to just five matters of fact.

Taken together they confirm us in our conviction that public services have a value that is both undeniable and perhaps even beyond estimate—not only to us as individuals eager to get on with our own private, day-to-day lives in safety and comfort; but also as a society, as a people, as a community of friends and neighbours with a distinct and definite collective vision of who we are, who we want to be and how we want the rest of the world to know us.

The value we place on our public services is, for us, a measure of the value we place on being Canadian.

It all starts to fall apart.

The more we devalue and downgrade public services, the more the Canada we know and love starts to fall apart.

It could hardly be otherwise considering:

1 Business is not magic.

Failures and foul ups in the private sector happen every day. Any grand scheme based on blind faith in private business is doomed from the start.

2 We're choked back to half-throttle.

Keeping our twin-engine economy aloft is a lot easier when we have the private sector and the public sector both working at full throttle.

3 History is against us.

We've tried relying on the private sector for everything before. The results were disastrous. That's why we invented the public sector.

4 We're all hard at it.

Working 9 to 5 is working 9 to 5. If anybody's got a soft touch it's not us everyday working people.

5 Public money keeps us all solid.

The public sector is always important—even more when the private sector runs out of steam.



Business

is not

magic.

But we're all supposed to pretend that it is.

We're supposed to go along with the current "conventional wisdom" and forget what we know. This is stupid. It's like asking us to believe that the cod can never be fished out. We know better. Conventional wisdom or no conventional wisdom, we know what we know—and we know business is not even close to being anything like magic.

We all can remember business fouls like Bre Ex—the gold mine that wasn't; Edsel—the car nobody bought; new Coke—the drink nobody drank. And, a recent Newfoundland example, Career Academy—the privately-run school that failed to make the grade with 1,400 students and 250 teachers.

It takes no effort to recall even bigger business blunders. Remember the Exxon Valdez, Three Mile Island, Love Canal? Remember the Westray Mine?

Yet, the cheerleaders for "private is better, private is best" never tire of their chant—even when the facts go against them.

For example, the 1998 edition of the Newfoundland government publication "Post Secondary Indicators" reports

graduates of universities and public college programs have more success at getting jobs than graduates of private colleges. It also shows that university and public college graduates get higher paying jobs. In other words, the facts show Career Academy could not offer Newfoundlanders more than was already available to them through their own Memorial University

In spite of this, the government promoted private schools, while cutting Memorial University's funding by some \$18 million.

The lesson in all this is NOT that the private sector is, by definition, bad and the public sector is, by definition, good. .

The single biggest mistake we can make is to believe there is any magic answer.

We're
choked
back
to half
throttle.

Twin-engine economies are a lot like twin-engine planes—lucky for us.

Twin-engine planes fly higher, faster and farther. So can our twin-engine economy.

One engine of economy is the private sector. The other is the public sector. Our economy does best when both sectors are in sync and are running at peak performance. When either one is not working at full power, for whatever reason, there is little chance of reaching cruising altitude, never mind soaring.

Our public sector engine has not been working at full power for a long time. It's been starved for fuel by the "pilots" in the provincial legislature. They have decided to "reduce government" (the public sector) in the mistaken belief that the private sector engine will magically put out more power in response.

This approach defies all common sense. It wouldn't work in a real airplane, and it won't work with the economy. In fact, it only makes manoeuvring our economy more tricky—just like flying a twin-engine plane on one engine.

Not to mention the times when the private sector engine falters. Without the public sector engine up and running we'd have nothing to prevent a crash.

This approach also defies the way we have decided to go about our business in Canada. The Canadian way, is a complete and thorough mix of private and public sector initiatives and enterprise.

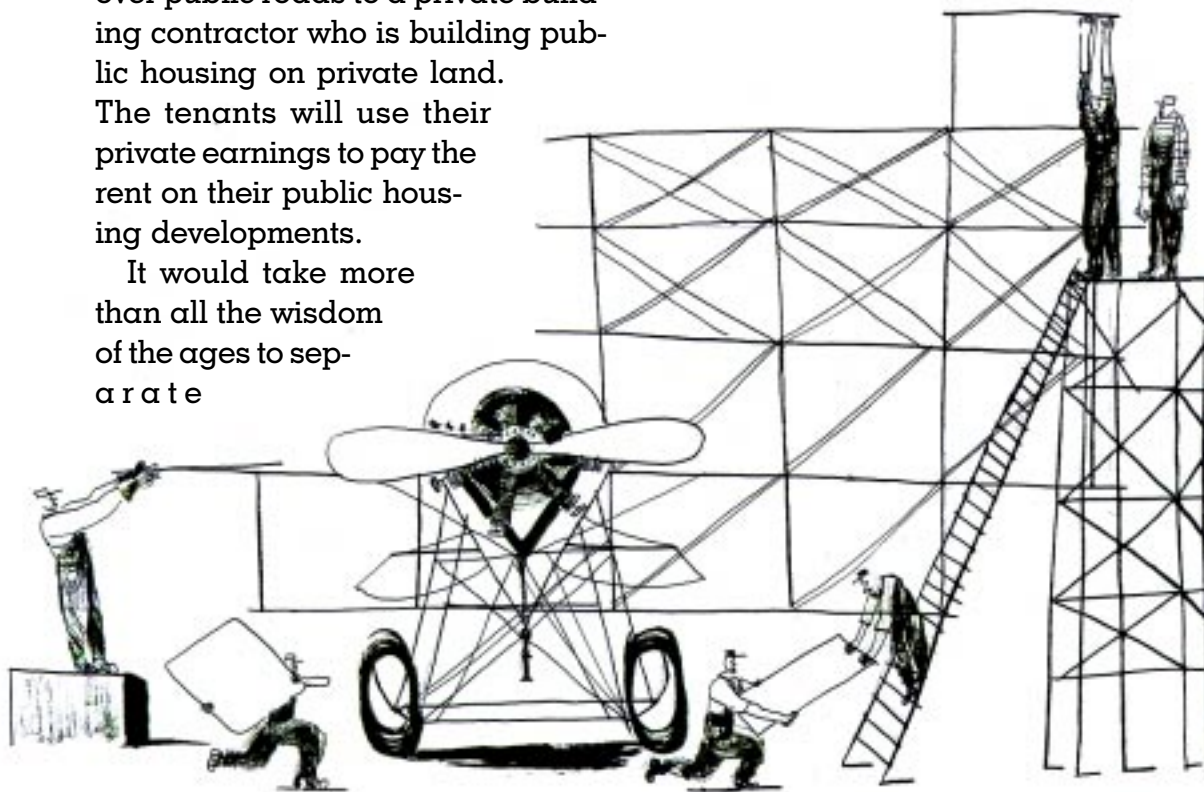
For example: a private oil company uses a public pipeline to send oil to a private enterprise refinery. The refinery output is sent over public railways to a private factory where it is processed in private machines using public electricity and privately-owned clay to make bricks. The bricks are shipped by private truck over public roads to a private building contractor who is building public housing on private land. The tenants will use their private earnings to pay the rent on their public housing developments.

It would take more than all the wisdom of the ages to separate

the supposed good from the supposed bad in this example. And what would be the point?

We have this twin-engine economy. It's not quite like any other in the world. It has served us well for decades and decades. So well, the United Nations has chosen Canada the best place in the world to live for four straight years.

Deliberately diminishing the power and potential output of one engine makes no sense. Two engines running at peak performance make it twice as likely we'll soar.



History

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against

US.

We've tried being all private before. It didn't work. That's why we invented the public sector.

Yet, for almost two decades now the public sector has been under attack—as if it was, and is, the cause of all our economic and social woes. How stupid do they think we are? Do they think we don't know any history? Do they think we don't know our own history?

Plenty of us lived through one of the worst economic and human disasters ever visited on this planet. Historians call it the Great Depression. Regular folks remember it as the Dirty Thirties.

Everything went to hell in a handbasket. Families fell apart, little kids starved, strong young men and women languished without work. It was hard to find your feet or get your bearings. Men like Hitler and Mussolini could somehow make sense. World war came to be an acceptable way out.

All of it triggered by the failure of the famous "unseen hand" of the unfettered free market to keep the economy from crashing to the ground.



The bankers and brokers and all the brains in charge didn't really know how to get us out of it. Everything they tried flopped until they had no choice but to try out the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, an economist who said the private sector could not always be counted on to recover all by itself. Sometimes, he said, it would take the deliberate and direct intervention of government into economic affairs.

The feeble and undernourished public sector was bulked out and beefed up to get things going again. Public works projects were used to give those working on them a regular pay cheque and all of us a better quality of life when they were completed. The public sector wasn't a drain. It was the spark plug of recovery.

Once again history had taught us the same old lesson it has been teaching us since human life on earth began: not that the private pursuit of personal gain is bad—but that it does not necessarily and automatically guarantee the greatest good for the greatest number.

The law of supply and demand in a so-called free market can achieve great things. But, it can also deny or ignore unacceptable consequences.

The industrial revolution and the rise of a consumer society did not bring protection of workers' health and safety, the guarantee of a good education to all our children, food

and water that was safe to eat and drink, medical care for any and all who need it, roads and highways passable in all weather, a natural environment protected from the unrestrained rape and pillage of commercial development.

All that and much, much more came to us by way of the public sector—everyday folks expecting and allowing their government to look out for everyday folks.

The lesson of history is plain: It has never been a matter of either/or, either the public sector or the private sector. It has always been a matter of one in productive combination with the other.

The public and private sector working together make a sum greater than their separate parts. That's the lesson history teaches us. Until we learn it, history will always be against us.



**Without our brain and muscle
not a single wheel could turn**

We're

all

hard

at it.

If anybody's got a soft touch it's not any of us everyday working people.

None of us are among the lucky ones. We don't get to choose the kind of work we do. We gotta do it all—the rewarding and interesting stuff, and the soul-destroying, body-breaking, graveyard shift, shit work too.

We do it all in the stock rooms at Wal Mart, behind the counters at Tim Horton's, sitting in front of a computer in some rabbit warren of an office, in the boiler rooms of hospitals, down man-holes in the middle of busy streets—whenever there's real work to be done we're the ones who have to do it.

So, we ought to know better. We ought to know better than to simply accept the blanket statement that: "Public service workers don't do much; and whatever they do do isn't worth much."

It's a stereotype that is no more accurate than any of the other stereotypes we fall prey to. It is a kind of "occupational prejudice" that is not that far in spirit from racial, ethnic and religious prejudice. It is every bit as unfair—and can even be as personally hurtful.

All it takes to demolish any of these preposterous prejudices is a little truth.

In the case of government workers, the easily observable and obvious truth is they do lots of real work, of real value, every day. Who would deny it? Who would deny the effort and value of:

- the home support worker who visits your grandmother and makes it possible for her to live at home in relative comfort and dignity, rather than in an institution;
- the driver examiner who patiently explains to the convicted drunk driver why he still isn't ready to get his license back;
- the calm, cool and collected dispatcher who answers your frantic call when your little baby daughter goes into convulsions;
- the public health inspector who makes a surprise inspection and tells the restaurant owner that he'll have to clean up or shut down before a customer gets sick.
- the lineman who spikes his way up a power pole in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm, to get your lights and heat back on;
- the vocational instructor who turns eager kids into skilled welders and pipefitters who can get real jobs offshore on the big rigs;
- the 98-pound female intake worker who learns to handle violent criminals and the mentally disturbed as part of her daily on-the-job duties;
- the child protection worker whose family complains because she seems to spend more time wor-

rying about somebody else's kids than she does her own;

- the roads worker who goes out in all kinds of weather and every season to make sure you can always get from here to there on time and when you want to;
- the social worker who helps "that nice retarded girl up the way" cope with living her own life, on her own terms;
- the jail guard who consorts with criminals all day every day so you aren't ever likely to have to;
- the liquor store clerk who looks up at the six-foot-five 17-year-old on graduation night and tells him to put the mickey back on the shelf
- the clerical worker who gets all the paper work done that always seems to be so essential to anything else ever getting done.

The point is plain: public service workers work hard at doing things we all value—and we all know it.

Therefore, whatever problem there is with government delivery of public services, it is not, at root, a problem created by the workers themselves.

Public

money

keeps

us

rock

solid.

The public sector is always important—even more when the private sector runs out of steam.

In 1996, Canada's public service workers earned \$103 billion in wages and salaries. That's not money that went into boutique banks in the Bahamas or secret Swiss accounts. That's money that stayed right here at home.

It's money public service workers used to put food on the table, a roof over their heads, a car in the driveway and have the odd night out. All of which is good for them personally. It's also good for us all in general because of something economists call "the multiplier effect."

One famous economist described the multiplier effect as a simple recognition of the fact that our economy works because "we all take in one another's laundry."

When people spend money on goods and services, the businesses they patronize become successful. Those businesses—like Wal-Mart, Sears, Canadian Tire, Tim Hortons, Loblaws, Blockbuster Video—then have more money to hire employees, pay their sup-



pliers, and so on. Those employees and suppliers also spend money on goods and services. This puts even more money into the economy. This, in turn, helps create even more jobs, and keeps the economy humming right along.

But it gets even better. Government collects more in taxes from us as taxpayers and consumers; and from corporations making more money and paying more taxes.

Plus, people who are working can take care of themselves. They don't have to rely as much on federal, provincial, and municipal social programs. Governments can reduce their program costs.

The net result is governments have additional money to turn their fiscal problems around and generate even greater levels of economic growth.

Of course, all this works the opposite way when public sector workers—or anyone else, for that matter—lose their jobs.

So the primary objective in managing the economy becomes obvious: keep people working. Because a dollar earned is a dollar earned. And a dollar spent is a dollar spent. Whether it's a "private sector dollar" or a "public sector dollar" is of no consequence.

Unfortunately, keeping people working is not easy.

The "official" unemployment rate in Canada is 8.5%—close to one million people out of work. We all know, from examples too close to

home, that the true unemployment rate is much higher.

We know the official unemployment rate skips over people working in very short-term jobs or people working part-time who want to be working full-time. Worse, the masses of people without work who have just plain given up looking for jobs are not counted as unemployed. They just disappear from the statistics even though there are up to 700,000 of them in Canada!

Add it all up, and the true unemployment rate in Canada is around 13%—more than 4% higher than the official rate.

The final conclusion to be drawn from all this should be obvious, namely: Let our public service workers keep working, earning and spending. Let public money continue to keep us rock solid.

One hell of a thing to risk.

We may well lose those things we value most, when all we really want to do is save some money.

Look what happened in Ontario. Mike Harris promised the people there a so-called Common Sense Revolution that would make their government more cost-efficient. But what he delivered as premier turned out to be long on revolution and short on common sense.

In fact, so many citizens complained to the Ontario Ombudsman she had no choice but to investigate the impact of the Harris experiment. She reported what she found in her June 1998 report. It should alarm us all.

The Ontario Ombudsman found the whole Harris adventure had deteriorated into little more than a callous cost-cutting crusade. She writes:

"Unfortunately, what sounds like a reasonable goal is too often translated into a single focus on the bottom line of saving dollars and cents. Through down-sizing, right-sizing, contracting out, privatizing, streamlining, and restructuring, dramatic cutbacks and shifts in resources have occurred."

Her report sets out example after example of what she calls the “damaging and worrisome” consequences of large parts of the Harris revolution.

But, as alarming and damning as all that is, it pales in comparison to what the Ombudsman has to say about the risk we all are in when something like the Harris revolution goes unchecked and unchallenged. She writes:

“If we believe in democracy, it is necessary to confront the view of those who say that because we are in a time of fiscal restraint we cannot always afford to be fair or just....”

“If we believe in democracy...”

That is what it all finally comes down to, that one phrase: “If we believe in democracy....”

It remains the most fundamental measure of all. A measure of the value we place on the way we govern ourselves. A measure separate and apart from what government costs us.

This is the crucial distinction. It is also the one bottom-line zealots like Mike Harris, and all those like him, always fail to make. What government costs is important. But some things are even more important. Things like democracy. Things like democracy Canadian-style.

The fact is all democracies are not created equal. America, Britain, France, Canada are all robust democracies. We share many of the same values and beliefs. But we do not all place the same degree of importance on each. For example, individual rights are paramount in the USA. Canadians are more inclined to value community and consensus.

Thus, the Americans tend to see the public sector as necessary, but a burden. We Canadians, on the other hand, deliberately set out to create and use a strong public sector as a tangible expression of our natural desire to look out for one another.

We place a high value on our public sector precisely because it is public; because it is a creation of the people, by the people, for the people. It is the gift we all give to ourselves. It frees us from the anxiety of feeling defenceless in the face of life’s ups and downs and from feeling beholden to anyone for that freedom.

It suits us down to the ground. If it didn’t we wouldn’t have made it that way.

A Canada without a strong public sector could still be a democracy—it just wouldn’t be Canada.

It’s one hell of a thing to risk when we really don’t have to.

A shining city

All these arguments are significant—but they are not complete. They are not complete because they only deal with tangible things, things we can count, tag and number, inventory and cost out. The real value of public services, the deepest value, has nothing to do with anything like that.

The deepest value of public services comes from something intangible, a thing we can never hold in our hands or tote up in some account book. The deepest value of public services is that they allow us to hold out for something human. They express our collective desire to have, finally and at last, community count for more than commerce; to have living with one another be more important than living off one another; to refuse to have the fate of humankind written always and forever on dollar bills.

Public services—and only PUBLIC services—can do that. Public services—and only PUBLIC services—are, by definition, something we provide for all. Public services are the ultimate statement of democracy. Public services come with no strings attached. You don't have to be rich to get them, or suitably "deserving," or the member of some club, cult or political party. You don't have to come cap-in-hand and toe somebody else's line. Where you live doesn't matter, or your age or gender. How much tax you

pay doesn't count. All that counts is that you are a citizen and a neighbour.

The deepest value of public services is that they lift us up. They lift us beyond a desire to have something more, to a desire to be something more: to be better than ourselves; to be kinder and gentler; to give more than we ask; to reach out rather than pull back. Public services allow us to still dream the dream of all peoples in all times: the dream of a shining city on a hill. A place where we all can live up to our best instincts and never have to surrender to our worst.

Public services in and of themselves cannot deliver that dream. But, they connect us to it. That is their deepest value to us: that link to a belief in something better; that stubborn, irrational, mystical, unshakeable, improbable, impractical, irrepressible human belief in one day, at long last, being able to live together as brothers and sisters, each and all, in a shining city on a hill.

It is still our dream. It is as valuable to us as sunlight.

on a hill

