

Deficit prominent in talks



On The Hill
With Garth Turner

The guy in the yellow sweater was angry. He stood up and stabbed a finger across the room in my direction.

"You people," he said, "are to blame. The working man gets a pay raise and then you people take it away, and I want to know for what."

I haven't been a politician long enough to consider myself one of "you people," but taking some heat for past tax increases is fair game when a Town Hall meeting is thrown open to the public.

My third one happened last Wednesday night in Burlington, and it was a good session, with Mayor Roly Bird finding time to attend. Even the man in the sweater was friendly when it ended.

"I just had to get that off my chest," he told me.

A lot of people have removed a lot of stuff from their chests over the past three weeks. After holding open meetings in Bolton, Georgetown and Burlington, I've had the chance to speak with a few

hundred more folks and feel really energized about the issues.

There were a lot of common threads in the hours of discussions. One I've written about here - the deficit - was probably the single issue brought up most. And in all three communities, people spoke out against the current policy of universal social programs. The logic of sending a government cheque to people who don't need it escapes a lot of us.

In Bolton, I heard people telling me they'd be willing to pay more taxes if they thought it would do some real good in getting the country's mortgage paid off. In Georgetown there was real frustration at the pace of deficit-reduction so far. In Burlington, people were encouraging the feds to look towards deep spending cuts, rather than tax hikes - and the point came up that with today's

real estate prices the last thing the working stiff needs is less after-tax income.

I can sure sympathize with that. And my first choice for nuking the deficit is to have Ottawa reign in spending - the middle class is paying too much of the freight right now.

People in both Bolton and Georgetown wanted to hash over the Quebec language debate, telling me in no uncertain terms that Premier Robert Bourassa is wrong to discriminate against the anglo minority. They urged me to have the government speak more strongly in support of that group.

Immigration came up in a strong way in Georgetown, and most people seemed happy with changes made to the law which are tougher on refugee claimants.

In Burlington, I'd say second-billing to the deficit was the en-

vironment, although this topic certainly came up everywhere. Personally, I was really happy to hear the U.S. administration say last week that action on acid rain is coming soon - that's a major policy shift. But there is a great deal more to deal with - like garbage.

I've spoken with both Frank Bean, chairman of Peel Region, and Pete Pomeroy, Halton chairman, about the impending garbage crisis, and feel a lot better after those meetings. It seems the various levels of government are really working together to get us out of this mess, and I'll do all I can to help.

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