

Several issues are snapping at Ontario Liberals' heels



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I am sure a great many of you have heard the old adage, "When you are up to your butt in alligators, it's tough to remember that your original intention was to drain the swamp." Being an MPP certainly proves the truth of that saying. A government must fight hard not to get so wrapped up in high profile and controversial issues that its long-term program becomes lost.

At the present time the alligators of no fault insurance, Sunday shopping infractions and teacher's pensions are swimming through the media. They are all very important issues but they are only a small part of the changes that the provincial government has undertaken.

One of the major steps taken during the last five years is deficit reduction. The provincial deficit has dropped from nearly \$3 billion to approximately \$500,000. The next issue is to try to end up with that figure at zero. Even the current \$500,000 must be examined in its true light.

A householder or business person divides their spending into two types. They have everyday operating expenses such as groceries and salaries as one type of spending and then they have large capital items such as houses, factories, cars and machinery. A smart person wants to make sure that their every day expenses can be covered from their cash on hand. With large capital items however, things are a little different. Most of us cannot hope to buy a house or factory with ready

cash. We go to the bank and get a mortgage. Well the provincial government does something similar. All of the deficit, which we can call the government's "mortgage" is going to new capital projects. Most of Ontario's capital spending for new schools and hospitals and other capital projects come from its ready cash, in the form of your tax dollars, in the general revenue fund. Unfortunately, the need for new facilities is greater at the present moment than the amount of revenue collected - so, we borrow to build. Hopefully we can eventually be in the enviable position of not needing to get a "mortgage" for the facilities that Ontario needs.

Deficit reduction is a long and ongoing process but other things have been happening during the most recent session of the provincial legislature. On Dec. 15, royal assent was given to legislation that will provide for major reforms of Ontario trial courts. The merger of the district and high courts, along with the small claims court, forms the Ontario Court of Justice (General Division). The present provincial criminal and family courts will be known as the Ontario Court of Justice (provincial division). Included in this phrase is an increase in the small claims court monetary limit to \$5,000 province-wide.

A second phase of the reform will merge these two divisions into a single one-level trial court able to deal with criminal, civil and family law matters. We will no longer see such things as a family law dispute requiring two or more proceedings in two or more courts. The new system will allow a family dispute to be dealt with in one proceeding before one judge.

The increasing importance of the role of organizations such as Halton Helping Hands and the Red Cross Homemakers was recognized in improvements in wages and training. These initiatives will strengthen the community care system. Funds have also been provided to agencies helping persons with developmental and physical handicaps. A comprehensive

reform of long term care has been initiated which will help maintain the independence of Ontario's seniors.

Work on environmental protection has been ongoing since the passage of the spills bill shortly after the government came to power in 1985. Recently new legislation was passed to eliminate the use of CFCs in aerosol containers. The government has also moved to put its own house in order. Reduction and recycling are being aggressively promoted in government departments. The Ontario environment minister has pushed the federal environment department for an early announcement of regulations which will match the proposed 1994 California standards for hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide for 1994 model-year cars.

These are only some of the government's recent initiatives. Others include the first major revision of the mining act since 1906, the introduction of the first major reforms to the police services act in four decades and the introduction of a new anti-drug strategy based upon prevention and education through community action and increased law enforcement.

The alligators will always be with us but long term strategies and programs are already beginning to lower the water level in the swamp.

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