

Opinion

Even local politicians feeling media heat

In writing a newspaper story my job is to present both sides of an issue in a way that will capture the attention of the readers. There is no point in writing a story that nobody is going to read. One way of achieving this goal is to use the most colorful comments of those interviewed for the story. Some might say this writing style is sensational and has nothing to do with good journalism. For me, however, this accusation only holds true if the comments, no matter how colorful, don't reflect the issues involved in the story.

Town councillor Joe Hewitt and Mayor Russ Miller seem to disagree with me. Recent comments made by the two politicians show they believe the Fifth Estate only cares about writing sensationalism at the expense of being fair.

Coun. Hewitt described the press at last Monday's General Committee meeting as follows: "the newspapers don't write the rules, interpret the rules and a lot

of times don't know what they are talking about."

He made this comment in response to a presentation by local resident Gord Vandevalk on the issue of a proposed golf course in Acton. As part of his presentation, Mr. Vandevalk used press clippings from the local and Metro Toronto newspapers to show the public feels ignored by politicians.

These clippings have nothing to do with a proposed golf course and whether the town should support it, said Coun. Hewitt. Even if they were relevant, Mr. Hewitt's description of the press implies the clippings should be discounted because they are probably inaccurate.

The articles were not directly related to the golf course proposal, but they showed the public does feel alienated from the political decision making process.

In this sense, they were relevant to Mr. Vandevalk's presentation because he felt the public



Ben's Banter
By Ben Dummett

wasn't being consulted on the golf course proposal.

I'd be the first to agree there was a sensational element to those articles presented by Mr. Vandevalk.

The press presents these sorts of articles because it knows people like to read about politicians being lambasted.

But at the same time, the press isn't pulling this information out of thin air. The public is expressing dissatisfaction with political decisions.

Politicians argue the press shouldn't publish these reports of public criticism because it's not based on fact. "If people understood the issues they'd never made these comments," politicians say in their defense.

Maybe this is true, and maybe it is not, but the point is politicians are failing to properly explain the issues to the public. Instead of condemning newspaper articles that show public dissatisfaction with governments they should concentrate on better explaining the issues.

Coun. Hewitt, in condemning the press, made reference to a quote Mr. Vandevalk highlighted in an article I wrote.

The quote was as follows: "We are going to throw a party and we won't be inviting Joe Hewitt and the mayor." The comment was made by one of the residents who successfully challenged a town decision to permit an asphalt plant in town.

That comment had nothing to do with the issue, said Mr. Hewitt. Mayor Miller agreed,

saying during an interview Monday, the issue was the official plan and not whether the residents were going to have a party.

Both politicians insinuated I wasn't interested in presenting the facts, I was only interested in selling newspapers.

I would agree with this if the article was only based on negative comments about the town. Sure I included the quote because of its color but I also included it to give readers an idea of how the residents felt about the decision and their dealings with the local politicians.

To the mayor's accusation that my story didn't focus on the main issue I say the first seven paragraphs of the story focused on the official plan. The supposed unfair comment only appeared in the ninth paragraph. I hardly see this as unfair journalism.

Instead of getting defensive when criticized, politicians should attempt to address the criticism and learn why criticism was directed their way.

Fly appears in Wilson's GST ointment

By VIC PARSONS
Ottawa Bureau
Thomson News Service

OTTAWA - Forget the bizarre bag of Liberal tricks in the Senate and widespread grouchiness over the GST - the biggest remaining hurdle to the new sales tax could be inside the federal bureaucracy.

The fly in Finance Minister Michael Wilson's GST ointment could be a strike by 3,500 federal auditors, which might zap the government's collection plans just as the tax goes into effect on Jan. 1.

To be sure, the tax will still be collected if the auditors are walking the pavement. But these folks are the ones who monitor Ottawa's tax records. About 500 of them will be working on the GST and they are already legally entitled to strike.

If the auditors aren't on the job, there's a real possibility the anticipated cash flow into federal coffers will be diminished because some businesses will

under-collect the sales tax from consumer.

Indeed, Auditor General Ken Dye warned recently the introduction of the GST could create new opportunities for fraud and bloated demands for tax rebates on current corporate inventories. The government would have to keep its guard up.

Trouble is, the guard may not be there.

Unlike some other groups of federal employees, the government will not be able to compel a portion of the auditors to continue working in the event of a walkout. There are no so-called "designated" auditors, a term used to describe workers deemed essential to public health and safety. Designated employees are forbidden to strike by federal law.

STRIKE THREAT

A chaotic disruption is all speculation, of course. Unions tend to talk tougher than they really are and negotiations often go down to the wire before a set-



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tlement is reached. As any labor leader will tell you, the threat of a strike is a better weapon than the strike itself.

But there is clearly a wide gap between the auditors, represented by the Professional Institute of the Public Service, and Treasury Board, which negotiates for the government.

The auditors complain that low pay, compared with the private sector, is causing headaches. Experienced auditors won't work in the federal employ, they argue, because of the disparity.

The government has offered pay hikes that amount to four per cent a year in a 39-month contract. This is significantly less than the current inflation rate.

The union wants increases of eight per cent annually in a 30-month deal. This is bound to make inflation-fighting Ottawa twitchy. (It also makes one wonder if the auditors know something the rest of us don't. Most experts have predicted inflation of between six and seven per cent with the GST impact figured in, and a declining rate thereafter.)

A conciliation board has come down the middle, suggesting pay increases of 5.5 per cent a year over 30 months.

MAILING BALLOTS

Without any movement from the government side, the union is mailing ballots out to members for a strike vote. The result is expected about mid-December. Since it's doubtful the union would be silly enough to call a strike in the slow Christmas period, the crunch time will likely come in early January, just as

the tax is getting off the ground.

It's something else to add to the musings of Small-Business Minister Tom Hockin, who opined this week that he didn't think the GST should be passed on Christmas Eve and hurriedly implemented Jan. 1. Of course, he doesn't have as much to say about it as the finance minister or Revenue Minister Otto Jelinek.

On another GST matter, the government blew a chance to show it is open to legitimate beefs about the tax. Conservatives in the Senate narrowly defeated a Liberal amendment that would have declared the North a GST-free zone.

There's no question the tax imposes a disproportionate burden on northerners. Because of the remoteness of northern communities, they already pay exorbitant prices for goods, including necessities.

The new tax will be calculated on top of those prices, inflated by transportation costs, thereby penalizing northern Canadians.

Whatever happened to John Diefenbaker's northern vision?

Have-not provinces suffer economic disparity

By PAUL BAGNELL
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OTTAWA - Promoting economic development in Canada's have-not provinces has often been referred to as one of the federal government's most basic obligations.

More than 20 years ago, prime minister Pierre Trudeau called the goal of economic equality "just as important as equality of language rights." In 1984, the royal commission on the economy said regional development is a "fundamental tenet of the Canadian federation."

Yet, almost 30 years and billions of dollars after federal governments began in earnest trying to stimulate economic growth in poorer regions of the country, the challenge remains as daunting as ever.

The most recent comprehensive study of regional disparity in Canada was completed in 1986 by Donald Savoie, head of the Canadian Institute for Research on Regional Development, in Moncton.

Savoie showed the traditional indicators of regional disparity - earned income, unemployment rates, provincial gross domestic products and government transfers as a percentage of personal income - moved only marginally from 1961 to 1981:

LITTLE CHANGE

A look at Statistics Canada's most recent numbers suggests little change during the 1980s.

For instance, measured against the Canadian average, Prince Edward Island's per-capita earned income (wages and other employment income) had risen only to 59.5 per cent in 1988 from 53.5 per cent in 1961. In Saskatchewan, the increase was only two per cent - to 69 per cent of the national average - over the same period.

The news is slightly better when provincial unemployment rates are compared. In 1981, the highest unemployment rate in the country, Newfoundland's, was 3.7 times as high as the lowest, Ontario's. This was down from 4.7 times in 1961, the most recent unemployment figures, for October of this year, showed the gap was smaller but Newfoundland's rate was still 2.5 times higher than that of Manitoba, which had the lowest unemployment rate.

Critics of government efforts to lessen these differences say Canada has lacked a coherent regional development strategy from the beginning.

Dalhousie University's Stephen MacDonald, a specialist in regional development, is one of those critics.

"We don't seem to take a



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strategic view in this country of what's going to be down the road 10 or 15 years from now," says MacDonald. Rather, we're looking four or five years ahead.

"And the flip-flops national policies have done through are really quite amazing when you look at them."

He points to the change from the "growth pole" theory, which concentrated assistance in selected urban centres, to broadly applied federal-provincial General Development Agreements in the mid-1970s.

"When we didn't get immediate results from the growth poles, we went to GDA's. That was a 180-degree flip."

The GDAs, now called Economic and Regional Development Agreements, are still in place, providing federal money to a variety of provincially ad-

ministered development programs. But MacDonald says they tend to be too short-lived.

"One of the real problems is that these are normally five-year agreements, and sometimes they get renewed, sometimes they don't. When they don't, some of the beneficiaries of the programs are left in a very shaky position."

Since 1974, when the GDAs began, there has been a steady trend toward decentralizing the decision-making in regional development programs, and to enhance federal-provincial co-operation in the area.

CO-ORDINATE

Today, three regionally based agencies - the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the Department of Western Diversification and FEDNOR in Northern Ontario - co-ordinate local planning and federal development programs to assist the region's private sectors.

The agencies concentrate mainly on assisting small enterprises to get off the ground, a strategy many experts say is essential in modern, service-oriented economies. A familiar complaint, however, is that the agencies are underfunded and unable to take advantage of larger opportunities.

"The idea of working with smaller projects instigated by

people who live in the area is marvelous, and it seems to work," says MacDonald. "However, one would have to have an awful lot of these small projects tied together to drag a whole province up by its bootstraps."

"There need to be longer-term development strategies implemented at the provincial level, and supported by the federal government. That's where some of the funding is going to have to come from, obviously. If P.E.I. could develop on its own, for instance, it would have developed long ago - because there have been lots of efforts put in there."

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