

Political Forum

Ottawa Report

The life of a politician

Over the last few weeks, this column has been heavy reading. Sorry. It's just that with the Gulf War, and all the stuff about Quebec, it was hard not to be a serious cookie.

So, let's talk about some of the things that happen in the life of an MP.

• The big news a couple of days ago was the resignation from the cabinet of Housing Minister Alan Redway - because he made a joke at the Ottawa airport about somebody having a gun in their luggage.

So he loses his job, title, car, cabinet salary and prestige for something completely unrelated to how he was doing his work. It's proof once again there are unbelievable expectations placed on somebody who gets elected. I noticed how the papers played out the story the next day - relating this incident to other "scandals."

Some scandal - one stupid and regrettable joke. I spoke with Redway that night, and tried to help him through a tough time. To his credit, he did not sound bitter or betrayed or broken. That's life, he said, so what are you going to do?

I mention this because just a few weeks ago Alan Redway spent time with me in Georgetown, meeting with area realtors, then in Bolton, where we met with municipal and regional officials, along with housing groups. By all accounts, they were impressed. So was I. This, now, is a loss.

• George Bush is president of the United States, and surprisingly tall. I had an opportunity to meet him last week - quite by accident. I was there in the hall in



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the Parliament Building when Bush and the prime minister were headed for talks in the PM's office. Mulroney spotted me, and introduced the president.

Bush was very pleasant, and asked me about the lapel pin I was wearing - the pin which identifies me as a Member of Parliament - as he fished out his glasses to have a better look. That pin features a maple leaf, and replica of the mace which sits in the House of Commons.

I guess he liked it. He may even have wanted me to give it to him. But, no darn way.

• There was a report out a few days ago that Ottawa might consider dumping bilingualism - or at least altering it somehow so government services are in two languages only when needed.

Makes sense to me. "Maybe we can keep this country together if we stop trying to convert everybody into what they don't want to be. Let Quebec be French-speaking, and we stop lecturing them about their discriminatory sign law. Let the rest of the country be English-speaking, and the Quebec separatists stop this agitation for

the destruction of Canada.

A lot of people tell me official bilingualism does not work. It costs \$500 million or so a year, and ends up irritating people - in two languages. There's also the feeling that it breeds discrimination in terms of who can work for the government. But there are also those who say bilingualism makes Canada special, unique and tolerant.

I'd appreciate your thoughts on this, if you have time to drop me a line. I suspect I know what I'll hear, but I want to confirm it before I give my two cents worth to the prime minister.

• This week I'm hosting a conference in Ottawa on how we can better deal with the national debt - the debt which makes our taxes about a third higher than they need to be, just so we can pay the interest.

Some people angry about taxes are coming; along with national business leaders; Michael Wilson and other MPs; a bunch of university students; and a clutch of economists.

It has been a great deal of work trying to put this together, and last week I invited all MPs from all parties to come and take part. It seems we have to find faster ways to cut government spending, and to stop going into debt. I'm looking forward to seeing Wilson standing in front of the Debt Clock at this conference, receiving cheques against the deficit from the Bolton Lions Club and the Halton Hills and Burlington Chambers of Commerce.

The first money into Canada's new bank account to pay down the deficit will come from our own communities. I'm proud of that - thank you.

Queen's Park Report

Fair tax commission

Several of you have expressed concerns to me about the need for tax reform to ensure a fairer system of taxation in Ontario. While our government does not have jurisdiction over the federal tax system, we do believe that measures can be taken within our own areas of responsibility and have therefore created a Fair Tax Commission for advice on these issues.

What are the objectives of the Fair Tax Commission?

The Commission has essentially two objectives: 1) to provide the government, through the Treasurer, with advice on how to design and implement a more equitable tax system in Ontario; and 2) to engage a broad cross-section of people in the inquiry process.

The Commission's terms of reference will make it clear that increasing tax fairness is the guiding principle behind all recommendations. However, other tax principles, such as efficiency, competitiveness, simplicity and neutrality, are to be considered as they relate to the overall objective of enhancing fairness.

What areas of taxation will the Commission be examining?

The Treasurer has asked the Commission to look at particular tax issues: low income relief, wealth taxes, land speculation taxes, corporate taxes, property taxes, tax-related incentives, taxes and women, the impact of the federal GST on Ontario's Retail Sales Tax, and environmental incentives and taxes.

How is this tax commission different from other tax reform exercises?

The Fair Tax Commission will provide on-going reports and advice to the Treasurer during its three-year mandate, along with a final report on the overall fairness of the province's tax



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system and suggested ways for improvement. The Commission is more task-oriented than most inquiries in that the Treasurer has identified specific tax areas for which he wants advice before the end of the Commission's mandate. The Commission will involve a wide array of interested groups and individuals in tax policy development.

What are the advantages of involving the public in tax reform?

Engaging a broad cross-section of people in tax reform helps to increase the public's understanding of the tax system - how it works, what are the perceived problems, what contributes to increased fairness, and what are the trade-offs involved in making a particular tax policy decision. It also enables groups with divergent views to examine the options, determine the trade-offs inherent to these options, and reach a compromise agreement which can fulfill some, if not all, of their needs.

How will the Commission be structured to ensure involvement of a wide array of groups and citizens?

The Commission will operate on two levels. The first level consists of ten commissioners who have three main tasks: supervising the Commission's research and consultation efforts; providing on-going advice to the treasurer; and, through a final

report, assessing the overall fairness of Ontario's tax system and recommending ways to make it more equitable.

The second level is made up of working groups. Each working group will examine a particular tax area for which the treasurer has requested more information. The working group will be comprised of a diverse mix of people who represent Ontarians affected by the issue under investigation. Their tasks will be to undertake research and consult with their constituencies and interested citizens. During the Commission's terms, they will provide the commissioners, the treasurer, and the public with discussion papers on specific issues.

Can anyone participate in the Fair Tax Commission?

There are a variety of ways that the wider public can participate in the Commission. For example, a person can submit comments and ideas to the appropriate working group. On topics not covered by a particular working group, submissions can be sent to the commissioners via the secretariat. Submissions will be accepted in any form (paper, audio tape, video, etc.). People can also attend any of the public forums of hearings which will be sponsored by the Commission. And the public will be encouraged to comment on the reports of the working group discussion.

How does the public get involved?

Any person who wants to provide input to the Fair Tax Commission may submit his/her ideas to the Commission's secretariat. The secretariat will forward submissions to the appropriate working groups for consideration. Effective March 15, the secretariat will be located at 1075 Bay Street, 6th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2B1, telephone (416) 325-8222.

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