

Opinion

Fires and fire prevention an ongoing concern

Halton Hills residents and the local fire department should both be commended in drastically reducing the number of fires that occurred last year in comparison to previous years.

Despite last year's success, however, this is a time when people should probably be conscious of fire safety practices - more than ever. Spring is fast approaching and that means grass fires and possibly lots of them, if people don't either exercise care or find an alternative way to cleaning their land, says Town Fire Prevention Officer Dave Ford.

Mr. Ford made his comments in connection with his unwillingness to say the drastic drop in fire calls and fire-related property damage last year was a trend-setting beginning.

According to the Halton Hills Fire Department's 1990 Annual Report, the dollar value of property damage caused by fire was \$1.2 million, down from 1989's peak of \$3 million. As well, firefighters answered approximately 425 fire alarms last year, representing a drop of 100 calls over the previous year.

These statistics could be construed as trend-setting especially



Ben's Banter
by Ben Dummett

since in the same annual report, its author, Fire Chief Bill Cunningham, states, "in his opinion

the ongoing efforts of our Fire Prevention Division is bearing results."

That seems like a logical enough conclusion but Officer Ford is more restrained saying only there could be a connection. No one, however, can determine for certain if someone decided to buy a fire alarm or a fire extinguisher because of the department's ongoing fire prevention public education program, he explains.

Although Officer Ford won't predict fewer fires in Halton Hills in years to come, his attitude implies this is what could very well

happen. First of all, Officer Ford's cautious approach shows the department will aggressively pursue its public education program.

Too much perceived success on the part of the department in its program could very well lead to over-confidence and lackadaisical attitudes towards fires and fire prevention.

If this happened it would only be a matter of time before a false sense of security spread throughout the community, meaning an increase instead of a decrease in the number of fires in Town - possibly for years to come.

Bank of Canada governor admits mistake

By VIC PARSONS
Ottawa Bureau
Thomson News Service

OTTAWA - John Crow is sorry he failed you.

As forthrightly as one can expect a central banker to be, the governor of the Bank of Canada admits he may have blown it in the late 1980s. And the grievous fault may have made today's recession worse.

Crow made the confession in his recent annual report. "It is arguable that if monetary policy had been more restrictive then, with higher short-term interest rates probably, interest rates would be lower now," he wrote.

"We didn't gain any points by being easier then," Crow told reporters, in what passes for a breast-beating mea culpa.

Come again? Is he saying he should have been tougher? Aren't most economists blaming the recession, now 11 months and counting, chiefly on high interest rates that flattened the economy, brought spending to an abrupt halt and hurt our foreign trade?

You must understand that

Crow is Canada's leading proponent of the philosophy of "tough love." He's only doing what he believes is best for you, whether you like it or not.

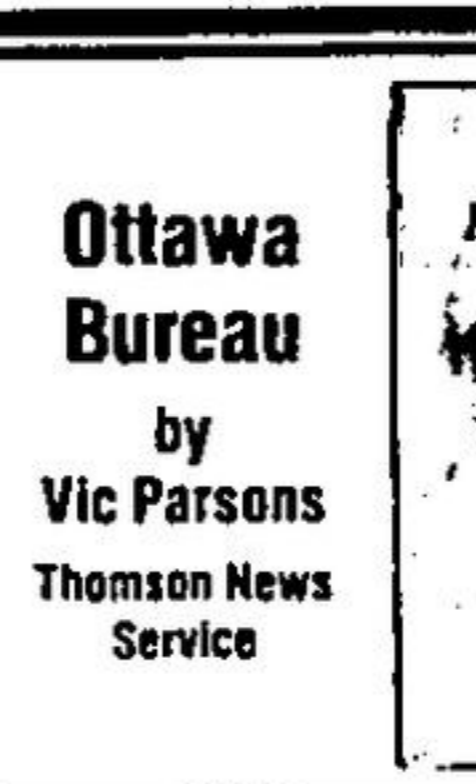
Take last week, for example. In both Canada and the United States, federal agencies reported the February unemployment rates on Friday.

PREDICTABLE RISE

In Canada, everyone who studies the subject knew the jobless rate would go to double digits for the first time since 1985. Indeed, unemployment rose even higher than most predictions, hitting 10.2 per cent. That was a half percentage point increase over January.

The day before the jobless report, Crow hit the brakes on declining interest rates. The key Bank of Canada rate went up one-hundredth of a point to 9.98 per cent, a modest rise but the first in more than three months.

The higher rates strengthened the Canadian dollar, which sounds good, but means our struggling exporters find it harder to sell to foreign



Ottawa Bureau
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customers who buy 25 per cent of all Canadian-produced goods.

What happened south of the border? The American jobless rate rose, too. It was the steepest increase in five years and shot up all the way to 6.5 per cent from 6.2. These levels, you'll note, are considerably below Canada's.

Nevertheless, the higher unemployment sent shivers down the spine of Alan Greenspan, chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve. The reserve is the U.S. equivalent of the Bank of Canada.

The Americans slashed their key rate by a quarter of a per-

centage point to six per cent - nearly four percentage points lower than Canada's - to kick-start the U.S. economy. The move was heartily approved by the White House.

There seems to be quite a difference between our own Genghis Crow and the kinder, gentler folks who set U.S. interest rates. Clearly, Crow is a tougher nut on inflation than on unemployment.

WANTS CONFIDENCE

Crow firmly believes that the lower inflation is, the less it erodes the value of your dollars, the better it is for public confidence and thus for the economy. So, he says in his report, "it follows that the underlying basis of monetary policy should be to preserve the value of money and to avoid actions that would damage it."

Crow speaks fervently of price stability, interpreted as zero inflation. But he's now willing to set milestones on the way to his ultimate goal after being convinced the public would respond better to specific targets than to fuzzy notions of what the central bank is trying to achieve.

His beliefs explain the hard line he has pursued since taking office. Crow says between 1987 and 1989, Canadians spent and borrowed three times more than the economy should have allowed. Recent Statistics Canada figures show debt levels of Canadians, compared to disposable incomes, are at the highest ratio since the agency started collecting such numbers in 1961.

Crow's concerns weren't helped by the government's political manoeuvrings. In the summer of 1988, taxpayers received a bonus with lower income rates just in time - coincidence, surely - for the federal election.

The election is history, and Finance Minister Michael Wilson recently admitted the tax cut was not a wise economic move, because it accelerated the spending and inflation Crow was trying to control.

Intriguing that we're getting these True Confessions now. At least Crow hasn't said yet that his interest-rate policy hurts him more than it hurts you.

Comments from Quebec should be viewed guardedly

By STEWART MACLEOD
Ottawa Bureau
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OTTAWA - Possibly because of the language difficulties and our dependence on translations, those of us in ROC - the rest of Canada - have always had this tendency to place a too-literal interpretation on comments from Quebec leaders.

It has always been thus.

Many remember how Quebec's "demands" dominated so much of the 1960s. The province never "asked" for anything from Ottawa or the other provinces, it was constantly "demanding". And that was largely because of the way we translated the French word "demander".

Once it was discovered it also meant to "ask", the bonds of national unity were immediately strengthened.

It's not quite so simple nowadays, but we're still placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on the exact words uttered by Premier Robert Bourassa and other political leaders in Quebec. The gist of a comment is not good enough, as it is in ROC, we must dissect every word.

And given the speed of events in the province these days, that's pretty well a full-time job.

Take, for instance, the premier's declaration last summer that, after the demise of the Meech accord, future constitutional negotiations would be on a bilateral basis with Ottawa. Quebec would not take part in the type of federal-provincial negotiations that led to Meech.

I think it's fair to say that, in general, we over-reacted to the comment.

HASN'T CHANGED

We are still over-reacting. The

media, and politicians in other parts of Canada, seemed to hang on every word, as the premier, and his cabinet colleagues, wrestled in Montreal recently with the constitutional issue.

There was reaction in most provincial capitals. And the issue was debated in Parliament. It was as though Quebec had issued a formal decree that it would never again speak to another provincial government about the Constitution.

The reaction from Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells was rather typical. "To suggest that they will talk only with the federal government is, in my judgement, to effectively say that no discussions will take place."

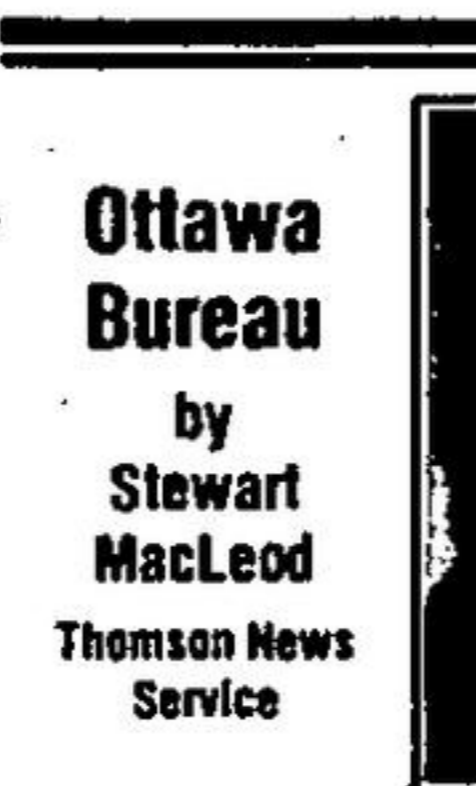
But that's not what Mr. Bourassa and his ministers have been saying - although, in fairness, they haven't been shining examples of clarity on the subject. That's probably because the original interpretation has made it difficult for the premier to sound accommodating without appearing to back down.

But we watched Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Gil Remillard to through the third-degree on television, with question after question about his "refusal to talk to other provinces."

And for the umpteenth time, he explained that what Quebec rejects is the painful process that led to the Meech accord. "What we're saying is that we're not going back to that type of negotiation."

Funny thing is that just about everyone in the country feels that process was flawed, that a better way must be found to change the Constitution.

But what can appear as a



Ottawa Bureau
by Stewart MacLeod
Thomson News Service

positive suggestion in one part of the country can also seem like a threat in another.

MUST TALK

The fact is, we can't have constitutional change without the involvement of all provinces. It's just a question of a format.

In his interviews, Mr. Remillard said Quebec would be "talking" with other provinces, "conferring" with them and "exchanging views" on constitutional matters. But it wouldn't be done with 11 first ministers meeting, a la Meech, around a big table.

After threatening to quit the party over its new constitutional policies, Municipal Affairs Minister Claude Ryan decided to remain with the Grits when Mr. Bourassa assured him no doors had been closed on future negotiations.

Mr. Ryan told reporters his colleagues "were afraid of the word 'negotiations' but they realize we have to hold discussions." He said he was satisfied the party had a mandate "to discuss things with anyone we want to."

Senator Lowell Murray, the federal government's minister for federal-provincial relations, didn't seem unduly ruffled by the

Quebec government's position. He said there is no need for the prime minister and all premiers to be in the same room at the same time to bring about constitutional change.

"There's nothing in the Constitution that says we have to have 10 premiers brought here to sit down with the prime minister," he said.

We all know, of course, that

regardless of Quebec's position, such a sit-down would not occur for many moons. If there is going to be constitutional change, a new method must be found and, far from hindering the reform process, Quebec may be making a major contribution toward this.

But these are probably not the best of times in ROC for giving that province the benefit of the doubt.

Berry's World



Jim Berry
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"The BAD news is, I lost my job. The GOOD news is, I was taken in as a member of a STREET GANG."