

EDITORIAL

With Hartley Coles



For whom Bell tolls

Sometimes Actonites must wonder if there isn't some master plan to try and wipe this community from the earth.

Not many years ago the Ministry of Transportation left Acton off the map for no real reason than negligence, oversight or nastiness, even though we are at the junction of two major highways.

For years the Province tried its best to retard growth in Acton by claiming growth would kill the fish in the Black Creek, a stipulation never used to limit growth in any other town in Ontario. It took years to have the ban removed. Meanwhile, business and commerce in Acton suffered from the high-handed acts of the Province.

The latest scourge to hit this community of over 7,000 souls comes from Bell, the telephone company that has collected tolls in Acton for a century. They listed all the Acton businesses in the newest directory of the Yellow Pages, these vaunted pages of business, under Georgetown. Imagine! Halton Hills maybe, but not Georgetown. We are 12 km from our neighbouring Halton Hills town.

Bell's action is an insult to the businesses in Acton who pay for these ads.

Contacted by *The Tanner*, the public relations man in Montreal admitted they did it on purpose. Why clog the book up with a lot of smaller place names? Put them all under one name – the biggest place in the area, and save money. Such gall!

I hope no one pays for their advertisement. And if they have, request it back either through a letter of your lawyer. Maybe a class action suit would be better.

Hopefully the Chamber of Commerce and the Town will point out this glaring insult to this community and get it rectified, ASAP.

Probably one of the last things readers want to hear about in these columns is more about the Ontario public service strike. Both sides in the dispute seem to have entrenched positions with no intention to give that proverbial "inch."

However, it occurs to me after reading reams of copy and ideological nonsense from both sides, that the whole thing could have been avoided with some "common sense" from the government, and less militancy from the union. Both sides have said they didn't want a strike and yet neither would compromise to avoid one.

Toronto Star columnist Walkom says it succinctly, "Ontario's Conservative government could have achieved its election campaign promise and cut the civil service by about 13,000 through simple attrition – without antagonizing its employees, without arbitrarily eliminating basic rights, without forcing OPSEU's back to the wall... Well before Harris took power... the mechanisms were already in place to do just that – and without strife."

Walkom notes that in the campaign document, The Common Sense Revolution, Harris promised to return the civil service to the approximate size it was in 1985. When Mike Harris took over in 1995 the civil service was already the same size as in 1985 – about 85,000 people. And it was already set to shrink by a further 12,500 through several different attrition schemes, most of them for civil servants who would either retire or become eligible to retire over the government's five-year mandate.

We suspect, as does Walkom, that in order to come up with that promised 30 per cent tax cut, the government decided to cut far more than the 13,000 people. In order to do this it breached the previous labour laws to remove successor rights for civil servants so that if any part of government is privatized, the buyer does not inherit the existing union contracts or even the employees. It's an old trick copied from anti-labour U.S. companies.

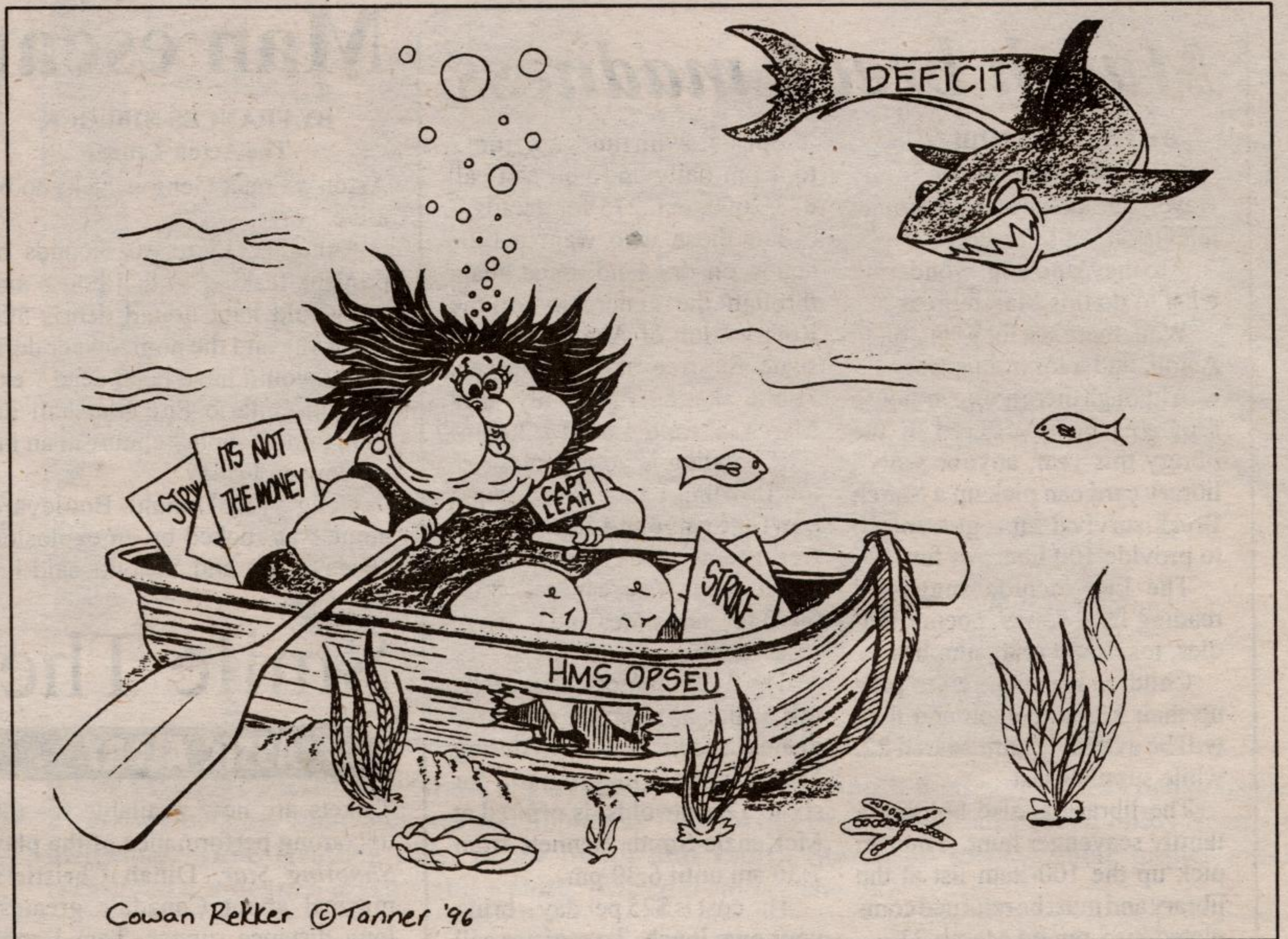
But worse, the government exempted itself from the Pensions Benefits Act to avoid paying \$500 million that would be due workers under a huge layoff. You should know that private sector workers still enjoy such rights.

Is Mr. Harris and his government sending a message to Ontario that he intends to break up organized labour so business can go back to paying sub-standard wages? Labour thinks so.

The government has some allies on its side besides business – those workers who make only a few dollars over the minimum wage and envy the civil service wages and benefits. They'd like to reduce everyone to a hand-in-mouth existence.

Let's face it, some civil servants do have better than average jobs and benefits, but surely the way to fix the situation is through negotiation and gradual reduction, not wholesale firing of people, to face an almost non-existent job market. What does the government, the Province, the economy gain with such tactics?

Some temporary plaudits, maybe, from business, but wait until business declines from the wholesale firings (which will, no doubt, be well emulated) with fewer and fewer people to buy the goods produced. The shoe then will be on the other foot.



ACROSS THE FENCE

With Joanne Stevenson



\$30 tax increase could save our teachers' jobs

It's been a week since the Halton Board of Education handed out pink slips to 1,500 teachers, instructional assistants, secretaries, custodians and lunchroom supervisors. We've had a week for the shock to subside, for that sick feeling to go away, for the anger to dissipate just a little. It's time for clearer heads to prevail.

Acton schools stand to lose 50 staff members – 26 teachers, 8 instructional assistants, one secretary and 15 lunchroom supervisors – from our three public schools. But we could lose more, as teachers who did not get laid off may be shuffled to different schools to fill some of the holes.

"I don't know how things will look in September," one principal told me, "but it can't be good."

The Board, naturally enough, blames the need for layoffs on the Province, who has cut transfer payments to Halton by an estimated \$8 to \$10 million.

The Province blames the cuts on the Feds and their reduced transfer payments. They also rest the blame squarely on Bob Rae's shoulders, with his short-lived programs like J.K. and photo radar, that ended up costing more money than they made.

The layoffs are estimated to save the Halton Board \$25 million, and would be necessary to keep our taxes at a zero per cent increase. An increase in the mill rate of 5 per cent (I can't get a firm figure from anyone who might know) – which translates to roughly \$30 on the average tax bill – could save all those jobs.

Now, I don't want to see a tax increase as much as the next guy. No longer can we throw money at our problems and hope they go away. Despite what the Board says about being the leanest Board in the province – "we've already cut to the bone," one trustee told me – there are areas of waste and duplication that can be eliminated.

We've been told the public and

separate school boards are sharing services, such as bussing, but I still see one bus for Catholic kids and another for public school kids driving through my neighborhood.

And why transfer payments from the Province are announced *after* the Boards of Education have put together their budgets is beyond me. For the Board to spend so much time preparing a budget based on what they *think* they will receive from the Province, only to scurry around and adjust their figures after learning what they actually will receive, seems a huge waste of time. And wasted time is wasted money.

However, if an extra \$30 from me can save all those jobs, I'll gladly pay it. I spend as much on school fund-raisers which buy volleyball T-shirts and subsidize class trips. My teachers and my kids are worth the price of pizza and a video on a Friday night.

Parent groups from Acton, Georgetown, Limehouse, Brookville, Milton and points between, plan on attending the Finance Committee meeting on March 25, at 8 pm, at the Singleton Centre in Burlington. Their hope is that a strong showing from parents will cause the Board to think again about laying off our teachers.

Don't sit back and think, 'They're going, so I don't need to.' The more parents who show, the stronger the statement. We should care very much about this – losing one third of the staff can't help but impact the classroom.

There was a huge reaction from the public when the cable TV companies ran their negative marketing campaigns a year ago. Angry subscribers wrote letters to the Editor, picketed and boycotted their TV stations. I would hope parents, voters and taxpayers are at least as upset about losing 30 per cent of our educators as they were about paying more for their cable services.

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