

EDITORIAL

with Hartley Coles

\$10 minimum wage?

Ontario's minimum wage was raised by 25 cents to \$8 an hour on February 1, the fourth increase since the Liberal government took power in 2003.

Prior to Feb. 1, 2004 and from 1995 the minimum wage had been frozen at \$6.85 an hour and the McGuinty Liberals pledged to increase it to \$8 during their term of office. They did this with annual increments of 30 cents an hour on Feb. 1, 2004, 30 cents in 2005 and 30 cents in 2006 and 23 cents now – totalling a 17 per cent hike over four years.

Students, meanwhile, who toiled for \$6.40 an hour from 1995 to 2004 are now entitled to \$7.50 an hour, a \$1.10 increase over the same four year term.

But is it enough? A campaign initiated by the NDP trade unions and some businesses, including the influential Toronto Star, are pushing the government to raise the minimum wage \$2 more, to \$10 an hour to counteract the rising cost of living and allow people to have a decent standard of living. Neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives are on board.

However the campaign is an embarrassment to legislators who recently raised their own wages by \$22,000 a year. Doling out 24 cents an hour to the province's low wage earners, who if they work 40 hours a week for 52 weeks would benefit by only \$510 per annum more, makes the MPPs look critical.

There are reasons why both the government and Her Majesty's loyal opposition are opposed to immediate \$10- minimum wage. Greg Sorbara, the finance minister, says its negative effect on business including the loss of jobs if it was implemented now. The government feels gradual increases such as this years 25 cents is the way to go.

Locally, a survey by Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce found 43% of their members supported the immediate \$10 increase while 57% were opposed.

"Some sectors would clearly suffer more than others," says Chamber president Helen MacCormack. "The service sector is a major source of local employment and we must be careful that increases to the minimum wage do not significantly impact employment levels or consumer prices." Her concerns were echoed by the president and CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, Len Crispino, who declared "Businesses in Ontario are not just concerned about the bottom line. While we do not want our province to prosper on the backs of cheap labour we must find the right balance in order to protect Ontario's position in a competitive global marketplace."

Not according to The Toronto Star which has published several articles which not only suggest but maintain that increase in the minimum wage in both Canada and the United States would benefit business rather than harm it. In some U.S. instances, where states exist side by side, the state which raised the minimum wage got considerable benefits while one which failed to do so suffered a decline. Other examples are cited.

Job loss? Critics of the government's position point out it isn't just wage increases that affect employment; The Bank of Montreal is cutting 1,000 jobs after recording record profits in 2006.

Obviously, \$8 an hour is not a living wage if it is the only source of income. It's a subsistence wage. Many of those who work for a minimum wage have other sources of income or support to rely on. Figures say as many as 90%. But that doesn't address the problem of those who have only \$8 an hour.

Raising the minimum wage by 30 cent increments annually has succeeded in raising living standards but according to some analysts, has failed to keep pace with the cost of living. Ten dollars an hour, they maintain would assist wage earners only what \$6.85 an hour did in 1995 – just catch up.

Strongest opposition to the \$10 increase comes from medium-sized companies (25-30 employees), with those employing less than 50 most opposed. Half of the companies indicate the increase would negatively affect their business. It suggests governments could balance the increase by ameliorating the taxes on small business.

So the debate rages but it likely won't change much at Queen's Park. As the Ontario Chamber's president declared: "A gradual increase is simply prudent as it allows businesses to adjust to increased labour costs and plan their budget accordingly."



HEINZ HAREM: The hiking club at Acton Seniors Recreational Centre enjoyed a hike at Scotsdale Farm, near Ballinafad, on a recent Friday in frigid -10°C temperatures. Eileen Dix dubbed the trek Heinz Harem Hike since only one man, Heinz Rusle showed up along with six women. Top, left to right, are Eileen Dix, Ruth Michasiu, Peggy Neilson, Pam Heutschi. In front are Heinz, Irma Marin and Catherine Barrett. - Eileen Dix photo

The winters of my youth

Remember when good old dad told horrific tales about the winters of his youth, when the mercury never rose past zero in the Fahrenheit scale for weeks, water pipes burst, cars wouldn't start and he walked to school uphill both ways with snow up to his eyeballs. Jaded offspring often scoffed at his tales but the winter of 2006 suggests that maybe good old dad wasn't embroidering those tales too much after all.

What were the winters really like? If you are old enough to remember when teams of horses pulled bobsleighs over the streets in town strewing future hockey pucks in their wake, then this scribbler bids you turn back the hands of time to when Acton was a village of 1800 souls and winter wrapped everyone in a snowy mantle...

Remember when...

- When the winter Olympics consisted of a 50 yard dash to the privy for that blessed relief.

- When kids were dared to stick their tongues on the steel railing at the school bridge – and did – their

Coles' Slaw

with
Hartley Coles



tongues sore for days.

- When coal had to be lugged from the cellar to feed the ravenous appetites of the cook stove and the Quebec heater in the parlour.

- When Saturday was bath night in a galvanized tub around the kitchen stove.

- When milk bottles at the door blew their caps and glorious white cream was licked by the kids.

- When bedrooms were heated by a stove pipe through those cold winter nights – and the fire was turned down.

- When boys wore gum boots and breeches and girls long beige stockings as they trekked to school for 9a.m. classes, were let out at 12 noon for "dinner," and came back again from 1:30 to 4p.m.

- When you prayed for cold weather so there would be ice in the arena.

- When Acton Citizens' Band played for Saturday night skating and at intermediate hockey games from their perch in the arena.

- When farmers drove spanking teams of horses into town on Saturdays pulling huge bobsleighs piled high with oats for chopping at the two feed mills.

- When horses were left at church sheds, munching on feed as they waited for their drivers to emerge from shopping or the beer parlour.

- When rural families did their shopping Saturday nights in stores that stayed open till midnight, driving home in cutters with sleigh bells jingling.

- When drying your socks and gum boots in the oven and beside the kitchen stove was a nightly ritual.

- When clothes turned so stiff on the line they wouldn't fit into a basket.

- When kids had strings on their

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