

Big Four gas stations taking over market

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companies, who now own most stations they supply and sell gas to the stations they don't own, to drive independents out of business.

The Big Four — Esso, Petro-Canada, Shell and Sunoco — may soon succeed, Guizzetti warned, but added consumers are in for an unpleasant surprise if they do.

"One day they're going to control, and they're going to do what they want on price," he said.

After eight months of study, a group of 47 Liberal MPs have decided Guizzetti is right, and that governments, including their own, must act to protect independents immediately.

"With the loss of independent participants, true competition will, for all intents and purposes, end," concluded the Liberal Committee on Gasoline Pricing in its report, released last week.

The result will be higher prices at the pumps, as are seen in provinces where independents have, in some areas, been squeezed out entirely, the committee said.

While he warned against "excessive regulation" of the industry, Oak Ridges MP Bryon

Wilfert said some changes are needed.

"What we want to do is have healthy competition in the marketplace," said Wilfert, who, as vice chair of the committee heard many complaints like Guizzetti's.

"One day they're going to control, and they're going to do what they want on price."

— Sunys station owner John Guizzetti

There are two types of independents in the region — the "branded" Big Four stations with private owners, and the "unbranded" whose owners are part of a small independent chain or have a no-name set of pumps.

The industry giants are claiming there's no profit in gasoline, yet they're building expensive mega-stations, said Randy Turner, a branded independent near Trenton and president of the Ontario Fuel Dealers Association.

Canada has gone from 24,000 gas stations to 13,500 in recent years because the industry was

"overgrown," but saying all independents are going out of business isn't true, said Brendan Hawley, a spokesperson for the oil industry.

These days, a successful station needs a prime location, high volume and other products to support its gas sales, he said. "Who sets the prices? The Big Four retailers have pricing coordinators who direct station managers from their main offices," Hawley said on Wednesday.

When prices have been close to cost, it's usually one of the big retailers who "say uncle" and decide to hike prices at its stations in an area, he conceded.

Guizzetti, meanwhile, said he thinks about closing every day. If it weren't for his other business, a truck centre, staying open wouldn't make sense, he said.

In Markham that same day, a gas station manager said he once was an independent owner in the region, but competition from the majors was stiff and he made no money.

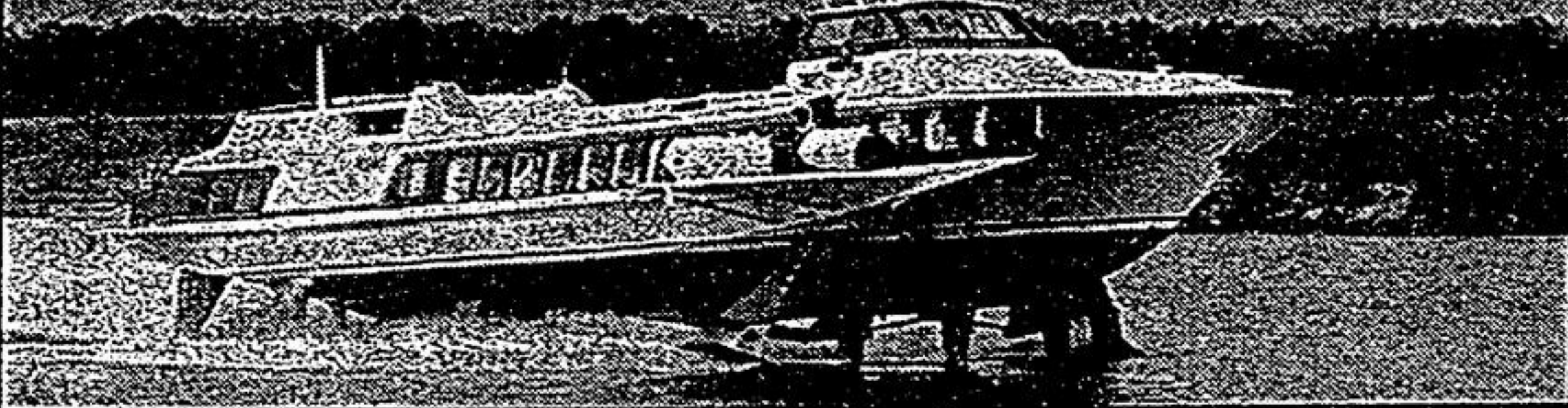
Now he doesn't care about the price — or even know what it might be later that day. That decision is made for him, and in return, the company guarantees him a margin that is enough to pay his workers and make a modest living.

"I am a slave," he said cheerfully from his station.

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