

PROVINCIAL AFFAIRS: Premier Mike Harris joins Ontario 'middle class couples' for breakfast

Boosting take home pay still on agenda, premier says



BY FRED SIMPSON
STAFF WRITER

Ten-year-old Vanessa Notte was late getting to school yesterday morning, but hoped the note she took with her would get her off the hook.

It was signed by Premier Mike Harris.

Later on, the premier and Vanessa might have had second thoughts on the weight the Harris note would carry in the wake of the continuing dispute between York's public elementary teachers with the province.

The scene was the Vaughan home of Joe and Mary Notte, as the premier sat around the kitchen table and scratched out the note on which rested the fate of Vanessa.

He was there for an impromptu question-and-answer breakfast session with the Nottes on his government's policies and several other "middle-class couples", as the press release put it.

"I didn't know anything about it," Mary was saying as a troop of media people trailed in behind the premier who, on this day, was definitely the man who came to breakfast.

"I had a friend who called me up and asked if I would be willing to have the premier come to my place for breakfast," she said. "I thought it was a great idea."

Harris wasted little time getting into the give-and-take session, as he explained he was there to "present you with my viewpoints on certain issues and to take suggestions from you."

On the current rotating strike campaign being carried on by the elementary teachers at the York Region District School Board, Harris was cautious:

"We are doing everything we can to try and facilitate free collective bargaining," he said.

But he indicated the province's stand could change if "there is a sense that education and the students' year is in jeopardy."

"Right now, we would hope the pressures on both the school board and the teachers are enough that they will come to a settlement within the next short period of time."

It was host Mary who confronted the premier on the Keele Valley dump, which local

residents have been clamouring to have closed for several years.

"Are we soon going to be done with the Keele dump or do we have to live with it for another 10 or 15 years?" she questioned.

Harris said the decision to close the dump was still on track, but the timeline was based on when it reaches the agreed-upon capacity.

He noted the City of Toronto is dispatching some of its garbage to places other than Keele Valley, which was one factor in slowing down the rate at which it is being filled.

"When it reaches that 'x' amount tonnes of garbage, it will be closed," he said. "But that may take a year or two longer."

Harris also acknowledged the province is a long way from "declaring victory" in the fight to increase the take-home pay of "hard-working Ontario families."

He observed while take-home pay for the average family had "improved significantly since 1995, in real terms it still has not recovered to its 1989 level."

"People can now keep more of their hard-earned money," he said, "but the recession of the 1990s was so deep, your take-home pay still isn't where it was a decade ago."

He agreed too many people

are working harder and harder without sufficient improvement in their families' standard of living.

"There's still a continued need to boost the take-home pay of average Ontarians."



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