

Stouffville Tribune

A Metroland community newspaper
37 Sandford Dr., Suite 306, Stouffville, Ont., L4A 7X5

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OPINION



Doug Devine

Premier pushes hot button as election call looms

"Harris wants to scrap Young Offenders Act," screamed the headline in Tuesday's *Toronto Star*. "Free more cons, wardens urged — Federal goal to boost releases by 69% this year," read the headline in Tuesday's *Toronto Sun*.

In other words, while Premier Mike Harris is trying to put more teenaged criminals in jail and keep them there longer, Prime Minister Jean Chretien is handing get-out-of-jail-free cards to thousands of hardened adult criminals.

This isn't the first time Harris and Chretien have been working at cross-purposes, but it's pretty easy to figure out which leader is heading in to an election. It's also not hard to guess which one has public sentiment on his side, even if much of that sentiment is somewhat misguided.

In keeping with his talent for finding, and then pushing, the hot buttons for Ontario voters, Harris seems determined to make crime, gangs and disrespectful teenaged punks a major cog in his re-election campaign. Ignoring the fact crime rates are continuing to plummet across the province, Harris is planning to prey on the public's growing, but unjustified, fear of crime.

He is calling on Ottawa to scrap the Young Offenders Act (since he has no control over the federal law) and replace it with one that:

- Lowers the age to 16 at which teen criminals are tried and sentenced as adults

- Prosecute kids under the age of 12 (the YOAs current minimum age) for serious, violent offences.

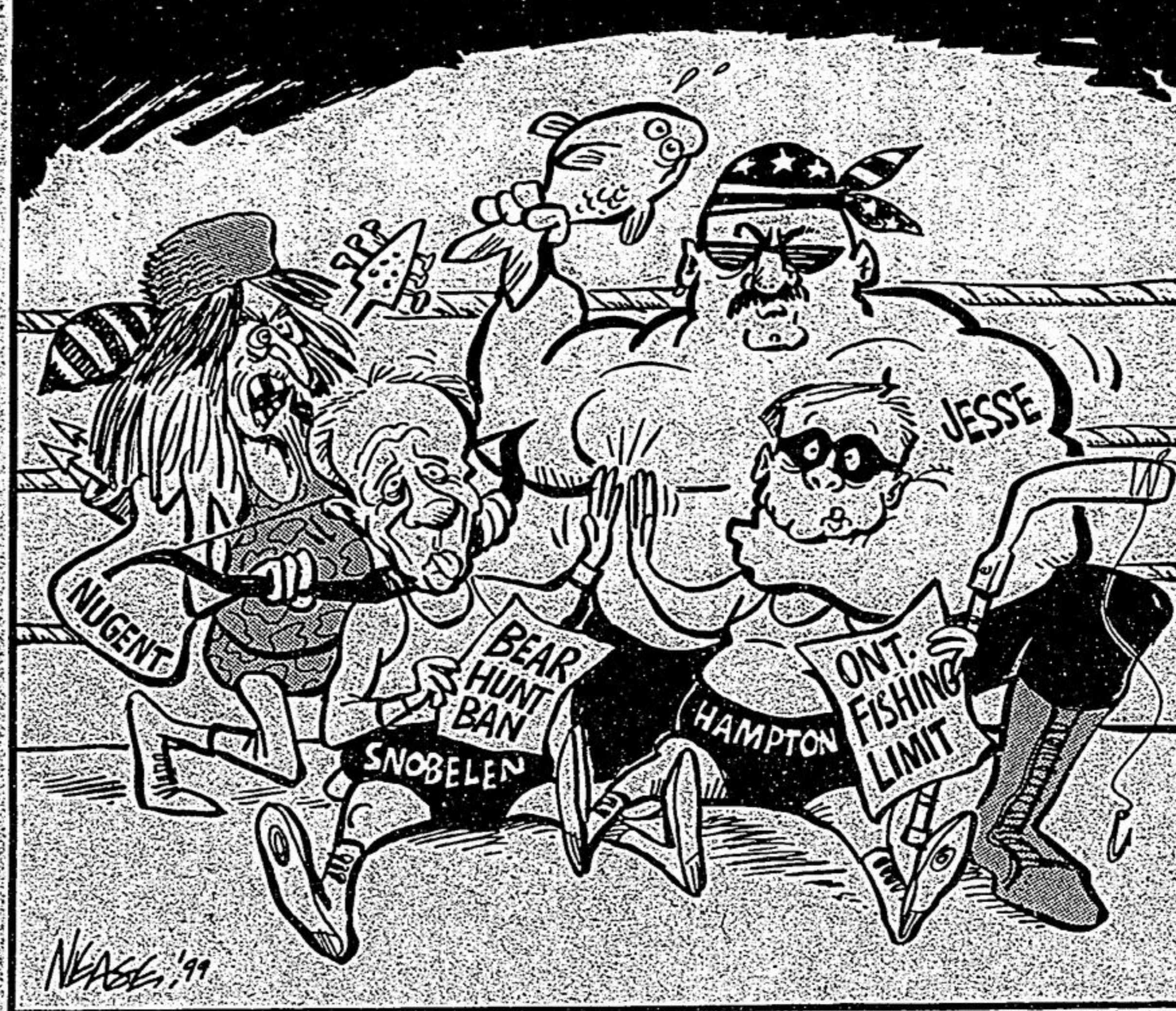
- Make jail mandatory for teens convicted of weapons offenses.

Although Harris' proposals will help satisfy the public's thirst for a crack-down on young criminals, it's debatable whether they will have any real impact. Ironically, the federal Liberals are already reviewing the Young Offenders Act and will more than likely make many of these very changes.

Of course, Harris is fully aware of that. He also knows if the changes are made after he gets re-elected, many naive Ontario voters will be convinced he had something to do with it — much as they're giving him credit for North America's booming economy.

Provincial Liberals may want to lobby their federal colleagues to hurry up and revise the YOA, in the hopes of taking some wind out of Harris' anti-crime sails before they carry him back into office.

WWF RAW IS WAR (OF WORDS)



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Councillors failed to hear concerns of residents

Re: Joan Ransberry's column, *Like it or not, it's democracy at work*, Feb. 23.

I agree that councillors are elected to represent us.

However, when the voiced concerns of the people are heard loud and clear and our councillors choose to ignore them, then there has to be another way.

A referendum on the pool/library issue would have been very democratic, but obviously too expensive.

However, each councillor could have contacted their constituents by letter, telephone or other means to poll our views.

It would have been novel to have heard from our elected representatives on such an important issue.

Meanwhile, our council is moving ahead with a "done deal" (as noted by Ransberry), despite significant public opposition.

To whom do these councillors believe themselves responsible if not to the citizens and taxpayers who elected them?

KATHLEEN GLAZIN
STOUFFVILLE

Growth inevitable

Re: Joan Ransberry's column, *Like it or not, it's democracy at work*, Feb. 23, and the recent activities at Whitchurch-Stouffville council meetings regarding the pool/library complex and overall development in the area.

If someone who has lived in this area through the Slater pool era, new arena,

extra ice pad and many other positive developments, suggested a meeting to discuss anti anything or pro anything arguments, I could be persuaded to attend and at least listen.

However, Hwy. 404 is a reality and Lake Ontario, Mississauga and Oshawa create a situation for northern expansion.

But Slater's pool is now gone and the library is too small.

Let us not return to the 1830's battle stations.

Let us exert some control of our education, recreation and economic development as the Whitchurch-Stouffville area absorbs some of the necessary and inevitable growth.

E. BRILLINGER
STOUFFVILLE

Coyote attacks are rare

Re: *Coyote population on rise in York Region*, Feb. 9.

I have lived in other major cities where coyote populations are indeed rising. Given the fast-paced growth we are experiencing in this region, it would probably be wise if residents kept pets from wandering free.

It is no longer the days of large farmlands and properties where pets had few hazards.

With urban sprawl increasing, we will have to adapt and be more tolerant of the wildlife that can survive our presence.

As pointed out in the story by Dan Stuckey of the Kortright Centre, coyote attacks on humans are extremely rare.

T. DOUGAN
MARKHAM

EDITORIAL
Region should fight to end tax pooling

You can't blame people for being angry about being stuck with property tax hikes of \$300 or more, particularly when businesses facing similar increases because of reassessment did get a relief package last year.

But the residential tax deferral program approved by York Region councillors last week is the fairest solution possible, without more co-operation from the province. It allows tax deferrals for homeowners who are disabled or senior citizens, earning less than \$23,000 for a single person or \$40,000 for a family, and facing a tax hike of \$300 or more.

Owners who qualify won't have to pay interest on the deferred part of their taxes until Dec. 31, 2005 and then will pay interest at a rate of prime plus 0.5 per cent. The plan will help as many as 9,150 homeowners who have been hit hard by the province's actual value property assessment scheme.

But for a group of property owners who attended last week's regional council meeting, it isn't enough. They wanted all large tax hikes to be phased in over three or more years, similar to the plan available to York Region businesses.

But the problem with this strategy is, if you phase in tax hikes, you also have to phase in tax reductions. Under reassessment, 57 per cent of York Region homeowners are entitled to a tax cut because their homes were overvalued in the past.

It's hardly fair to ask people who have been paying too much in property taxes for years to wait another three years for the problem to be addressed.

The region has done what it can to reduce the impact of steep increases on the people with the most to lose. To do more requires provincial help.

After all, it was the province's hastily imposed reassessment scheme that created the problem in the first place.

As Markham Mayor Don Cousens said, "We have the hard job to implement legislation which wasn't just perfect."

In fact, the legislation was far from perfect, but the chances of getting it changed now are slim to none.

And nobody would want a repeat of the province's solution to the problem of huge tax hikes for businesses, which was to force the region to use its "tool kit."

If local politicians want to ease property tax burdens for both local homeowners and businesses, they must push the province for an end to tax pooling — the insane scheme whereby York Region gives Toronto \$93.6 million a year for its social costs.

Based on the theory York Region residents depend on Toronto's social services, we are being forced to pay 46 per cent of the \$204 million a year charged to the four suburban Toronto regions.

None of which eliminates the need to fund health and social services within York Region, which last year cost \$78.9 million — less than we send to Toronto, but a pretty penny, nonetheless.

It isn't hard to see how our tax burden could be reduced significantly if we didn't have to participate in pooling, since pooling costs the average homeowner about \$500 a year.

And pooling has the potential to drive up local taxes even more than reassessment, because it allows Toronto politicians to set up programs then force York Region residents to pay for them.

Instead of pitting residents whose taxes went up because of reassessment against those whose taxes went down, York Region politicians and homeowners would do well to put their energy into fighting the outrageous cash grab resulting from pooling.

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Serving the community
since 1888

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The Stouffville Tribune, published every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, is one of the Metroland Printing Publishing and Distributing Ltd. group of newspapers, which includes the Ajax/Pickering News Advertiser, Alliston Herald/Courier, Barrie Advance, Barry's Bay This Week, Bolton Enterprise, Brampton Guardian, Burlington Shopping News, Burlington Post, City Parent, Collingwood/Wasaga Connection, East York Mirror, Erin Advocate/Country Routes, Etobicoke Guardian, Flamborough Post, Georgetown Independent/Action Free Press, Kingston This Week, Lindsay This Week, Markham Economist & Sun, Midland/Penetanguishene Mirror, Milton Canadian Champion, Milton Shopping News, Mississauga News, Newmarket/Aurora, Georgina Era-Banner, Northumberland News, North York Mirror, Oakville Beaver, Oakville Shopping News, Orillia Today, Oshawa/Whitby/Clarington/Port Perry This Week, Peterborough This Week, Richmond Hill/Thornhill/Vaughan Liberal, Scarborough Mirror, Today's Seniors, Uxbridge Tribune and City of York Guardian.

