

House rises for the summer

The Legislature rose for the summer two days earlier than expected, but more importantly the PC majority voted to adjourn the Legislature until October 27, six weeks later than originally scheduled.

This session, besides the budget, the government passed legislation weakening freedom of information laws, amalgamating conservation areas, strengthening codes of conduct for municipal councillors, expanding ministerial control over school boards and education policies (e.g. making attendance count for a part of a student's grade), giving itself powers to take over and expand Billy Bishop Airport, and taking control over more municipal planning and building rules (to try to speed up home building).

This session saw further erosion of accountability and continued the government's pattern of pushing through controversial legislation at a breakneck pace.

But two Liberal MPPs keep a committee going

My Ontario Liberal colleagues, MPP Mary Margaret McMahon, chair, and MPP Stephanie Smyth, permanent member, of the Standing Committee on Government Agencies prevented the Ford government from shutting down the committee over the summer. The Ford government makes about 1500 appointments to public jobs every year. Less than 30 or so get reviewed by this committee because of time limitations. This extended summer recess (five months!) would be a great time to review more appointments, but the government side tried to shut it down. MPPs McMahon and Smyth, with support from the NDP members, used a procedural maneuver to keep this committee working after the House rose for the summer.

FAO report

This week, the Financial Accountability Office released its Economic Monitor report. The report found that households continue to face rising grocery costs and forecasted that higher gas prices, driven by the conflict in Iran, could cost Ontario households more

than \$600 this year. It also noted that Ontario lost nearly 53,000 jobs at the start of the year, the steepest quarterly decline since 2009. These losses were felt across all age groups and affected both full-time and part-time workers. On Friday, StatsCan showed a large increase in employment in the month of May, commensurate with a surprisingly strong U.S. labour report.

So, Ontario's economy remains uncertain. In any case, many families and businesses are under increasing financial pressure. At a time when people are focused on affordability and economic security, the government seems to have let its focus slip towards pet projects on the Toronto waterfront and further concentrating power in cabinet.

Metrolinx safety concerns

This week, documents revealed that repeated safety incidents within Metrolinx were handled exclusively through internal investigations. These incidents reportedly included trains passing stop signals, speeding, and entering active track work zones. Earlier this year, a GO train was found to have been travelling at an excessive speed and came close to derailing.

In each of these cases, Metrolinx investigated the incident itself. While the agency can report incidents to the Transportation Safety Board (TSB) or the Ministry of Transportation, the criteria for doing so aren't clear.

At times, an internal investigation suffices but given the number and seriousness of these safety violations in recent years, many of which had the potential to cause significant harm, there should be stronger oversight and greater transparency to ensure the safety of both transit workers and passengers. Metrolinx has had a lot of negative press recently. One way they can restore some trust in their operations is to have the TSB investigate their more severe violations and make public the criteria for reporting incidents to the TSB.

Uncontroversial bills to have province-wide hearings

Two relatively uncontroversial government bills, the omnibus agriculture Bill 109, and the omnibus public safety Bill 119 both passed second reading unanimously on voice votes. The government is having these two bills, and their respective committees, travel across the province this summer for public hearings.

By contrast, the budget bill, which the opposition voted against (it contained schedules which weakened Freedom of Information and other controversial items) skipped committee stage. I think public hearings on the budget bill would have been embarrassing for the government. Committee stage exists for a reason: to bring out controversies, hear from the public, and argue about the details. Otherwise MPPs aren't doing their job. I will try hard to hold the government to account this summer, but I fear these two committee tours will be a bit like another "Protect Ontario" advertisement.

(Le Francais suit)

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