

## COMMENT

## ‘Putting students first?’ Really?

It's beneath teachers to use innocents as political pawns



MARTIN REGG COHN

Teachers keep casting themselves as undervalued victims in Ontario's latest political power play — crushed by the jackboot of Premier Dalton McGuinty.

Now, the shoe is on the other foot — and the moral high ground that teachers' unions claim to occupy is slipping away.

Two of the biggest unions are protesting against an anti-strike law by calling on teachers to boycott extracurricular activities. Teachers describe the pre-emptive legislation, passed this week with Tory support, as a thermonuclear weapon deployed by the governing Liberals.

But the union counterattack — actually a diversionary attack against students on the sidelines — is the equivalent of targeting civilians with rubber bullets: Not meant to do any serious harm, just rattle children and parents while still inflicting pain.

We always knew it would come to this, because teachers never seem to learn the lessons of history. Engaged in perennial fights over wages and benefits, enraged unions keep lashing out — first vowing to defeat an NDP government, thereby electing the Tories, thence consorting with the Liberals and finally coming full circle again.

Is the government's goal of public sector pay restraint more or less right? Yes.

Did the Liberals do it the right way, using teachers as foils in a by-election byplay? No.

Now, teachers have turned against McGuinty — turning out in force to defeat him in a critical vote this month that deprived him of a majority. Full credit to them for using the political system to punish a politician they helped elect.

They should have quit while they were ahead, teaching the Liberals a lesson for trying to exploit a labour dispute for political purposes. Instead, the unions are exploiting ordinary Ontarians for their own pecuniary purposes. How can teachers explain to students and parents that they will now be used as pawns in a pointless struggle that is mostly about union leaders saving face and venting anger?

With the battle lost, teachers may think they are fighting for next time. But any party in power would treat teachers more or less the same way as the governing Liberals — as they have in the past — because the money is not there.

Yes, extracurricular activities are performed on a volunteer basis by teachers. Growing up in Montreal, I watched teachers use the same tactic in a protest that achieved nothing except leave students like me puzzled — and I'm still perplexed.

Teachers are free to volunteer or sulk as they please — no one can coerce them into doing the right thing. But that doesn't mean unions should feel free to act irresponsibly, churlishly or recklessly. They blew it by boycotting negotiations for most of the year, while rival unions representing teachers in the Catholic and francophone systems bargained creatively to come up with a sensible, cost-effective compromise. I won't repeat the arguments and counter-arguments here — getting 12 per cent cumulatively over the past four years, and 25 per cent since 2003 isn't a bad deal in my view — but taking it out on kids is wrong-headed.

As parents, we teach our children to respect and heed their teachers because they are role models. When unions advise teachers to leave students in the lurch over coaching teams and running clubs, they are acting disrespectfully toward the kids we entrust them with.

We listened last July as Sam Hammond, who leads the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, gave a defence of his demands — insisting that his members were “putting students first.” Now, he is advising teachers to put students last — until further notice.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation also called for a one-day boycott Wednesday, but says it won't advise members on future tactics. That's a cop-out by a union that's playing coy: it should tell teachers unequivocally that their fight is with the premier, not the students who come to class and look to them for help after class.

It's beneath teachers to bring their political fight into the schoolyard. The unions have already punished McGuinty, and they will have plenty of opportunity to play the parties off against each other in future campaigns.

Keep the kids out of it.

Martin Regg Cohn writes on provincial affairs. mcohn@thestar.ca, @reggcohn

Canada's sons and daughters who suffered the ultimate consequences of war in Afghanistan must be accorded the same level of respect as those who fought at Vimy Ridge, Juno Beach and Kapyong.

MIKE BLAIS OF CANADIAN VETERANS ADVOCACY, ABOUT CONTINUING EFFORTS TO FIND A HOME FOR THE BATTLEFIELD CENOTAPH THAT ONCE SAT AT KANDAHAR AIRFIELD. THE MONUMENT WAS RETURNED TO CANADA AT THE END OF THE KANDAHAR COMBAT MISSION AND IS IN STORAGE IN OTTAWA.

## Some Burlington developers at odds with council's sustainability direction



JOAN LITTLE

“Sustainable,” apparently, is an unsustainable word in the lexicon of some Burlington developers.

Sustainable development has been a priority for council ever since Mayor Rick Goldring (the city's environmental advocate) was first elected in 2006 as a councillor. In recent years the city's own buildings have been built to sustainable standards, and some private developers have followed suit, hitchhiking on the green aspects in their marketing. Included in the list are the Union Gas regional office, Sun Life office building, Mountain Equipment Co-op, Appleby Woods condo, Strata condo and Walmart.

In late August, following a 2010 council direction, planning staff brought an official plan amendment (OPA) incorporating sustainability guidelines into the official plan, as other municipalities have, including Oakville.

The items the city wants to encourage are: sustainable site development, water efficiency and quality, energy efficiency and air quality, building materials and resources, indoor environmental quality, and maintenance of green building performance.

To be perfectly clear, the city can't force developers to comply because these guidelines exceed requirements of Ontario's Building Code. This is stressed throughout the report and OPA, with the words “voluntary” and “encourage” appearing repeatedly. No misunderstanding. It's my opinion that an environmentally sensitive Ontario will eventually enshrine requirements into the Building Code. The question is when.

Staff held an open house, canvassed agencies and industry insiders, and provided an advance draft of the OPA and guidelines to the Burlington housing and development liaison committee June 25, which was discussed at its June 27 meeting.

At the August development committee meeting, Michael Barton and Vince Molinaro appeared for the home builders, opposing the guidelines as unnecessary and onerous, questioning how consistently they would be applied. After a long and thorough discussion, committee recommended their approval.

At the Sept. 4 council meeting councillors Paul Sharman and Marianne Meed Ward moved to defer the item for staff to “review the proposed amend-

ment based on further consultations with representatives of the development industry including specifically the Hamilton Halton Home Builders Association.” Sharman's opposition wasn't a surprise, but Meed Ward's was. (She supported guidelines, but not in the Official Plan).

Their motion followed a letter from the home builders to the mayor, which councillors also received, expressing “shock” over revelations that these guidelines would not be voluntary, but mandatory, with no possibility of opting out. He also expressed concern that incentives weren't included. (The report said they would be developed separately).

Councillor Rick Craven quizzed Barton on why he believed the provisions were mandatory. He stated his reading led him to that conclusion. (Interestingly, much of the remaining developable land is ICI — Industrial, Commercial and Institutional — not residential).

I subsequently received a letter from Jeff Paikin, president of New Horizon Development Group, critical of my not getting that the guidelines were mandatory, and outrageously hypercritical of Burlington staff and their presentation. As a result, I replayed streaming of the committee meeting to see if I'd missed something that said “mandatory.” It wasn't there, but “encourage” and “voluntary” appeared frequently.

At council, the mayor spoke of creating a task force on sustainable guidelines at the Oct. 1 meeting. He said he hadn't thought the guidelines had enough teeth, and that existing development should also be addressed. The task force would include the mayor, a councillor, reps from industry, utilities, and the sustainable development committee.

BUT, he anticipated it would take six to nine months — time Burlington doesn't have. The city is nearly built out now.

What development will be affected nine months from now?

Council agreed that technical and legal issues should be addressed. Craven requested a separate vote on the part of the motion that directed staff to consult further with developers — they've already been consulted. (A majority voted to leave it in).

Face it. The industry doesn't want guidelines, but some individual companies do a good job building sustainably.

Craven was the strong defender of the guidelines. Maybe by summer of 2013 we'll finally have new ones for a Burlington virtually built out by then.

Freelance columnist Joan Little is a former Burlington alderman and Halton councillor.

## Back-to-school time — in Uganda

After a summer in Hamilton, it's hard not to make comparisons

THOMAS FROESE

SOMEWHERE OVER THE ATLANTIC OCEAN We're in the air again, my family and me and today's newspaper.

This time it's the Daily Telegraph, dominated on Page 14 by a large ad for the latest iPad. Beside it, a smaller story on how one in four U.K. teachers wouldn't send their own kids to the schools they teach in. And below, a brief about a Pediatrics Journal study that shows obese youth don't think so well.

It's an interesting juxtaposition. Our kids can access easy information, but need so much more.

I think about it now during my family's own back-to-school week in Uganda. Once again we'll be up with the sun weekday mornings to get our three to classes.

It's not an easy slog, getting to this pricey but decent international school in Kampala proper. The traffic can be deadly. But we have few alternatives. And more than ever, I appreciate the school's more traditional approach.

Take that grossly overweight gym teacher who breaks a sweat just getting to the starting line. This was the recent lament of a Les Chater YMCA instructor to several of us after we had finished our morning swim.

Not that Ontario doesn't have some very worthy teachers. It does. But his point, and I think it's valid, is that our culture — Ontario school culture and I'll say western culture in general — has slid into some very generous ways. There was a time when gym teachers had to be in shape.

So am I surprised when my kids, who attend an Ancaster school every May and June, tell me how easy their Canadian school is?

I think of my own childhood experience, with, say, track-and-field days and high-jumping in the pouring rain and getting ribbons for winning — not just participating — then going with my best buddy to regional meets, our heads held high.

How many Ontario elementary schools have dropped such competitions altogether? Someone's feelings, apparently, might get hurt.

We can still applaud a 14-year-old who swims across Lake Ontario. But do more of us wonder why she'd put a toe in the cold water to begin with?

Now I'm on BA Flight 63 over the Atlantic, heading back to the so-called Dark Continent, Year Eight in Africa for my family, grown to the Froese Five and including my lovely bride Jean.

Ugandans will ask us to help get their kids into anything but government-funded schools, schools that, in Uganda anyway, lead to certain education death.

We'll respond in various ways, including with the spirit of our home and its large community playground, the one that took years to build.

There, Sunday mornings can now be filled with the laughter of dozens of African kids. Expatriates and Ugandans alike use our asphalt hockey pad, another place of learning, likely the only hockey pad in Uganda, where, sure, we play to win.

New for this year is something from my nine-year-old, Liz. Packed in the belly of this plane, along with this season's hockey gear (thank you Canadian Tire and National Sports for the discounts), are Liz's folders and pencils and glue sticks for what she calls Making A Difference.

Her heart already set on a teaching career, Liz is known to gather Ugandans into her outdoor classrooms. In this case her subjects won't be math or reading, but life skills more along the lines of “Recycling” and “How to Make Money,” and “Christianity.”

“It's just how I'm made,” she said when I asked why she's doing this.

It's how she's made. To challenge and to be challenged. It's how we're all made, really.

Not that Liz sees everything perfectly. She recently told me about her Hamilton friend visiting France. It was Paris and the Eiffel Tower and, and Daddy, oh Daddy, why can't we go to France? And “Oh Daddy, we never go anywhere!”

This, from a child who gets around more than Samsonite luggage, a girl splashed in this newspaper shortly after her birth with a column and large photo and telling headline “A daughter of the world.”

I told Liz that Paris will come. “But in the meantime,” I said, “you can't compare yourself to Canadian kids. A lot of them have too much.”

And in another way, not nearly enough.

Author and journalist Thomas Froese lives in Hamilton most of the year. See his revamped website at [www.thomasfroese.com](http://www.thomasfroese.com)

Ugandans will ask us to help get their kids into anything but government-funded schools ...

## SPEC BRIEFLY

Short and excerpted comments sent to [letters@thespec.com](mailto:letters@thespec.com)

## More attention to philanthropy than pollution

With regard to ArcelorMittal Dofasco's financial support for community and environment, clearly the media were present, hence the article in the paper and the television coverage. Where was the media coverage when there were concerned citizens outside with recent pictures of industry exceeding the limits in spewing out crap? ArcelorMittal supports a lot, which is great but why are they neglecting their closest neighbours? Because they will not benefit from it. All blame health issues on poverty and smoking. It is a sad state of affairs. LORNA MOREAU, HAMILTON

## Put all garbage on the 'empty' side of street

My girlfriend and I were sitting in the backyard on our garbage day. We live on a street with parking on one side only, from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of each month. After listening to four city trucks (same two, each direction) pick up the garbage and recycling bins, we thought of this. For the streets such as ours, why not put the garbage on the side of the street where nobody is parking. The trucks would only have to go down the same street once, not twice. This should save wear and tear on the trucks and save fuel and time for the employees. You could even extend this to the winter and plow all the road to the side nobody is parked on, thereby not burying the cars on the one side of the street and making the removal that much easier. TERRY WALTON, DUNDAS

## Hamilton needs waterfront trail

A recent opinion piece by Bruce Stewart pointed out Hamilton's lower town used to be for the poor who had to live with the smells, sounds and soot of residents earning a living. Now, people are moving into the lower city by choice, interested in the solid houses at affordable prices and increasing amenities within walking distance. The city has an opportunity regarding the west harbour's rail yard development to consider growth in that area over the next 25 years. A waterfront trail the full length on this side of Hamilton Harbour, 15 metres wide with a paved bike path five metres wide down the middle, would ensure waterfront access for apartment dwellers and local residents. ALLEN BOWLES, BURLINGTON

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