

Don't fall for distractions ... *This Budget will change Ontario for Generations!*

Editor's Note: In April, the new Ontario Government announced their first budget which traditionally covers the 12 month period beginning in March. Now, two months later, everyone affected by these *cuts and efficiencies* - from municipal and regional governments to non-profit community organizations which are partially funded with Ontario grants - are continuing to struggle to understand the real impact of these significant and retroactive budget cuts. One thing is certain: Our municipal taxes will increase this year, care of Ford's *Ready, Fire, Aim Approach* to making change.

Opinion by John Milloy: Politics is full of distractions.

Every elected official knows the heartbreak of having an important announcement eclipsed by news that a colleague expensed a \$25 hamburger.

It can work both ways. Although petty distractions can undermine positive initiatives, governments also proactively use them to divert attention from less savoury topics that they don't want you to discuss over morning coffee.

A textbook example is the Ford government's most recent budget. If you ask most random Ontarians the budget's themes, they will have a quick answer: "changing the colour and slogan of Ontario's licence plates, replacing the so-called 'three-men-in-a-hot-tub trillium logo,' and allowing tailgate parties."

Policy wonks might add a few more tidbits: "Bars can now open at 9 a.m. and advertise happy hour."

When I pointed out to my less political friends that these are little more than efforts to distract them from the significant spending cuts and policy changes contained in the budget, their answers were far from reassuring.

"This is all so last month ... And didn't all the newspaper headlines say it wasn't a slash-and-burn number? ... And don't you think that the new license plate looks like a Q-tip box? ... And where do you get a \$25 hamburger, anyway?"

We need to focus.

Buried within the most recent budget were items that will have long-term effects on our province — items that deserve discussion, even weeks later.

For example, support for our most vulnerable.

Legal Aid Ontario saw its budget cut by 30 per cent and was told to stop supporting refugee claimants seeking asylum. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, meanwhile, will see its funding reduced by \$1 billion over the next three years.

As a former minister of community and social services, I can assure you that this will not be achieved through mythical efficiencies. The ministry's core business is transferring money to individuals in need and the only way to find significant savings is through measures that hurt our most vulnerable.

Students will also see the quality of their education suffer. On the primary and secondary front, budget measures will mean larger class sizes, less support for struggling students and less choice in high schools when it comes to the arts, social sciences and skilled trades.

And as for post-secondary education, although much attention was paid to new accountability measures for our colleges and universities within the budget, there was little mention of the significant cuts faced by these institutions. When the province recently decreased tuition fees by 10 per cent, Ontario's colleges and universities were deprived of around \$450 million in revenue that will have a direct impact on what happens in the classroom.

To add insult to injury, the province also slashed student aid by more than \$600 million. Many folks who are keen to learn but are struggling financially — including young people training for their first career and older workers upgrading in a volatile job market — either won't be able to afford college or university or will shoulder debilitating debt.

"That's awful," say many of my less politically aware friends, "but do you technically need an SUV or a pickup truck to hold a tailgate party, or can I use my Toyota Corolla? And I never really saw three men in a hot tub when I looked at that logo."

As a province, we must not be distracted. This budget will have a real effect on the lives of Ontarians, and we need to understand its implications.

This is particularly true as details of further cuts dribble out. Since the release of its budget, Ontarians have learned about cuts to public health units, public library services, flood management programs and child care — many quietly announced in the apparent hope that nobody would notice.

We may find that not all decisions are necessarily bad. What about experts who argue that class sizes are not that important? What level of support do we owe students and those on social assistance? Does the federal government not have a responsibility to pay the legal costs of refugee claimants seeking asylum?

The role of the provincial government is to lead us in thoughtful discussion around these and other relevant questions — not try to distract us.

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