

Ontario must ensure public supports and services for everyone

By Trish Hennessy

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Since the 1970s, when the free market, anti-tax movement began trying to win back the political narrative after a postwar wave of social policy expansion, the notion of shrinking the size of government has at times taken on the fervour of a crusade.

“I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub,” Grover Norquist, the anti-tax founder of Americans for Tax Reform, once quipped.

In Canada, we’ve had our share of crusading anti-tax, small government politicians. You’ve heard the code words: “tax burden”, “tax relief”, “respect for taxpayers.”

In the Ontario provincial election, PC Leader Doug Ford is promising tax cuts, claiming he could pay for them by finding “efficiencies” to the tune of a four per cent cut in government spending — the equivalent of \$5.8 billion in cuts — without impacting public sector jobs and services.

But we all know there is no free lunch. \$5.8 billion in cuts is equivalent to slashing 10 per cent of the Ministry of Health’s budget.

In my contribution to the book *Taxes Are Not A Four-Letter Word*, I wrote about how the tax-fighting politician is happy to talk about the dollars in your pocket but far less forthcoming about the positive role that tax contributions play in our everyday life.

Economist Hugh Mackenzie estimates middle-income Canadian families enjoy an average of \$41,000 in public services that many couldn’t afford if we didn’t bulk buy them with tax revenue.

That’s the problem with the “government is too big” argument: it delinks the role of government and taxation from the public services that both provide.

The question “is government too big?” is a distraction from the pressing issues facing governments of all sizes.

Is a rural municipality resourced well enough to make sure its community gets public supports despite spanning a large geography with a thinly spread out population?

Does the City of Toronto, the sixth largest government in Canada, have the revenue tools it needs to deal with the problems associated with increased density, including traffic congestion and packed TTC subways? To address its social housing repair backlog? To fund its poverty reduction strategy?

When someone asserts that government is too big, ask questions.

Too big for what? Too big to address the pressing need for more affordable housing? Less crowding in emergency rooms? Smaller classroom sizes? School repairs? Well-staffed public libraries? Clean parks? Pharmacare? Long-term care? These are public goods that governments provide. They are real and essential.

How do you measure the size of government? If you compare provincial government program spending, Ontario spends less per capita than any other province.

If you look at the size of the Ontario Public Service, it employed 25 per cent fewer full-time equivalent staff in March 2016 than in March 1991, according to the government report *Transforming the Ontario Public Service* for

the Future. It says there were 4.6 Ontario public servants for every 1,000 Ontarians in 2015-16, down from 8.2 in 1990-91.

Is government big enough? How long is your wait for a hospital bed or an affordable child care space? Ontario's population is expected to grow by more than 30 per cent over the next 25 years. Are public services and staff needed to provide them keeping pace?

What is government for? If the worry is that government shouldn't be too powerful or intrusive, that has little to do with size. You can shrink government yet be more intrusive through expanded surveillance and criminal law powers.

"Let's make government big" makes no more sense than "let's make government small." Government should be just big enough to do what we need it to do. The main job of any government is to protect the common good. It's to ensure that the system works for everyone.

This obsession with small government encourages us to think small, to reduce our expectation of public service. It disengages us from our responsibility as social citizens to ensure public supports and services are there for everyone.

Worse, it fuels polarizing politics.

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