

OPINION

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Solving problems of rural and Northern Ontario

Last month I wrote about how, during a recession, economic issues tend to dominate the political agenda at Queen's Park.

Subsequently, during periods of growth and prosperity, the focus shifts to the major spending portfolios like healthcare and education.

Occasionally an idea falls onto the provincial or national policy agenda out of nowhere. That scenario happened a few weeks ago when an opposition MPP announced that the major problems facing Ontario could be easily solved if Toronto became a separate province.

The source of this recent debate is Bill Murdoch, the Progressive Conservative member of the provincial legislature for Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound. Controversy is not new to Murdoch, particularly as it relates to disagreeing with his own party. He went public once with his opinion that former Leader John Tory should enter the Ontario Government's Second Career program and secure training for a new job since he was seriously under-performing in his occupation as Premier-in-waiting. Murdoch was subsequently expelled from his caucus in a manner similar to the fate he envisions for Toronto within Ontario.

A few weeks ago, at a Bruce County Federation of Agriculture meeting, Murdoch determined that the only solution for the on-going issues of livestock damage inflicted by coyotes and red tape burying the agricultural industry is a separate province of Toronto. His position is based on a belief that urban decision makers ignore rural perspectives and formulate policies that have unintended negative consequences on residents outside the 416 area code.

A separate Toronto is the type of issue that columnists, radio show hosts and bloggers can extend for months. It is now open season for pointing out the deficiencies and liabilities of big city living. Traffic congestion and three hour one-way commutes to work often dominate that debate. First and foremost, a discussion about Toronto in any context is

ART SINCLAIR

FROM THE CHAMBER



certain to incite jokes about the Maple Leafs. A Brantford Expositor editorial noted there is only one reason why rural Ontario should separate from Toronto – their legendary hockey team would no longer be ours.

A more serious approach to this new and emerging debate in provincial politics appeared in a Waterloo Region Record editorial on March 19. A separate province of Toronto is not going to happen. However, Bill Murdoch's outlandish proposal contains a message that should be heard by the "people in power at Queen's Park" – which is located in Toronto.

The Record notes that rural residents can cite their own list of grievances against the provincial government dominated by urban communities on the west shore of Lake Ontario. These grievances indicate a sense of alienation and detachment. Many areas are feeling underserved when it comes to medical care – including urban centres like Kitchener Waterloo.

According to a study conducted by

PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2008, Waterloo Region received provincial hospital funding at \$279 per resident less than the provincial average. The discrepancy translated into a \$205 million shortfall in annual operating funding. Additionally, the Region is receiving funding for other critical services at a rate below the provincial average, including long-term care, home care, addictions, mental health and community support for seniors.

In March of last year, Waterloo Regional Council passed a resolution calling on the provincial government to implement a Health Based Allocation Model to ensure areas experiencing significant population growth receive appropriate funding. In a positive development, the recent throne speech announced that a review of the Public Hospitals Act will occur and legislation will be introduced – suggesting that some major funding changes may be implemented.

Subsequent media reports have identified government sources as indicating that a Health Based Allocation Model will be utilized to divert more funding into regions where the population is growing. The proposed funding model may be announced in the 2010 Ontario Budget.

Ironically, here in Waterloo Region we are debating amalgamation while Bill Murdoch is proposing de-amalgamation on a provincial level. Supporters of municipal amalgamation, whether it is Kitchener and Waterloo alone or all seven area municipalities, have argued that larger centres generate more attention at Queen's Park and Ottawa and subsequently receive the necessary funding for required local programs and infrastructure. This is a theory which would explain the growing sense of discontent in rural Ontario.

The idea of regions in Ontario "separating" is not new. Municipal politicians and other officials in the Northwest have over time advanced the idea of the area beyond Thunder Bay leaving and joining Manitoba. The website of the Ontario Ministry of Northern Development, Mines and Forestry notes that government decisions made in Toronto have

not always agreed with northerners' views. This passionate difference of opinion has initiated serious consideration for separation from the rest of Ontario. For example, in 1891 a government for the north was a popular idea in Sudbury as a response to proposed taxes on mine properties.

If every region in Ontario that was agitated at Queen's Park for excessive taxes followed that approach, there would be far more than ten provinces in Canada right now.

Are northern issues addressed differently by decision makers in the south? The City of Timmins would definitely respond with the affirmative.

Xstrata, the Swiss based miner that acquired Falconbridge, has announced plans to shut down their copper and zinc operations at the Kidd plant, eliminating 670 jobs. Timmins – James Bay MPP Gilles Bisson has observed that if the provincial government is providing billions of dollars to the auto sector of southern Ontario, it should be willing to do more to assist the devastated mining industry in the north.

As the Record editorial on March 19 pointed out, removing Toronto from Ontario would still leave a province dominated by Ottawa, Kingston, Hamilton, London, Windsor, Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo. The residents of these centres would collectively possess significant strength against the relatively declining population of rural Ontario.

Governments at all levels are fundamentally in the business of balancing interests and no one will be content with every decision made by every government. Ontario is a huge geographic area with a highly diverse economic base and, particularly during a recession, public financial assistance is limited.

For now, we in Waterloo Region are content with knowing that our local hockey team makes the playoffs on a regular basis – unlike Toronto.

*Art Sinclair is vice president
of the Greater Kitchener Waterloo
Chamber of Commerce*

Community intelligence includes social sector smarts

My breakfast companion this month, John G. Jung, joined Canada's Technology Triangle as CEO in August, 2008. As co-founder and chairman of the global think-tank "Intelligent Community Forum" (ICF), John shared with me his thoughts about how communities can future proof themselves, and how we can all help to create a healthy social 'ecosystem.'

Here's a summary of our breakfast chat:

Jan: When Waterloo won the World's Top Intelligent Community Award in 2007, we were honoured for how we exemplify the development of a prosperous economy based on broadband and information technology. Is community intelligence primarily about digital prosperity?

John: I think technology plays a tremendous role, but the intent of the Intelligent Community Forum is to study and highlight best practices in community economic and social development. Improvement to quality of life is one indicator of community intelligence. Community collaboration counts, too. I'm pushing for an even broader agenda. The criteria and standards evolve.

Jan: You talk about digital inclusion. What's the human aspect?

John: We've seen some great examples of digital inclusion that resulted in social benefits. A community of 26,000 people in Georgia was given free Internet in 1994. This move engaged the disenfranchised and attracted entrepreneurship and e-commerce. They got the 'Net' as well as a safety net.

Jan: When I look at the 12 steps of

JAN VARNER

UNITED WAY



community future proofing, I see a real connection to what United Way is trying to achieve locally, particularly in the goal of building a safe and healthy community. You talk a lot about infrastructure. Though you have an urban design and architecture background, do you see social infrastructure as part of the equation?

John: Absolutely. Social cohesion and what I call soft infrastructure requires innovation and leadership in a community's social services sector. I also see a real link between physical infrastructure – the roads, the buildings, the physical structures and networks – and the social infrastructure. Take transit, for example. If a family can't

afford a car, that shouldn't limit them from finding and accessing employment. So transit needs to take this social need into account. Our urban development policy needs to consider social services needs, with elements like mixed housing and support services integrated into neighbourhoods.

Jan: That brings our neighbourhood priority to mind. Our goal is to make sure neighbourhoods are inclusive and thriving. What does this mean to you?

John: We need healthy, caring communities where people want to live and raise families, and where the kids grow up and want to stay or return. I've lived away from this area for many years and I was happy to return in 2008. Our city should be a magnet for talent and a place that encourages aspirations. That takes good urban planning but also good social planning.

Jan: You've traveled the world observing thriving communities. Can you share some examples of real social innovation?

John: We saw a great example in Korea. They trained 350,000 people to use web-based government forms and resources by placing computers in 7-11 stores. They took the technology to the people and made their lives better and easier. The broader goal is to help communities everywhere find sustainable renewal and growth.

Jan: You've also talked about a new definition of rich and poor. How should we be redefining this?

John: It's not necessarily about money. Wealthy people have social needs and issues too. We've traditionally framed discussions

of poverty and prosperity around socioeconomic factors. The intelligent community work is telling us that prosperity is about so much more than how much money you make or how much monetary wealth your community has. Human development depends upon people participating in the community's decision-making process.

Jan: There's a role for United Way there. Our regional priorities were created by the community for the community, based on the issues they saw as most important.

John: We need to keep talking about issues and making our community aware of its strengths and weaknesses. We all need to keep sharing our stories, training and educating people. We need to nurture leadership in all of its forms. That's where we'll find wealth and prosperity. We each have to ask "What kind of community do I want to live in?"

Jan: Our regional priorities are actually a response to that question. We know that to have the greatest impact, we have to focus on key issues and go deep.

John: You need to be aware of the big picture but you need a laser-like focus on what you can do to make change or help. United Way has an advocacy role as well. Your role is evolving. The idea of funding issues ties in well to that soft infrastructure that encourages innovation.

Note: I'm 'taking reservations' for this column. If you'd like to meet me for breakfast and a discussion, please drop me a note at jvarner@uwaykw.org.