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## Rebuilding public services would pay for itself, auditor's report shows

Can the new Ontario government rebuild public services and still pay down its budget deficit? The answer is a big YES, judging from the latest provincial auditor's report.

"The provincial auditor has proven, once again, what we've been saying all along," said OPSEU president Leah Casselman. "The Harris-Eves Tories didn't just demolish public services, they wasted piles of taxpayer dollars doing it.

"It's time to stop throwing money away and start rebuilding the services Ontarians depend on."

The annual auditor's report, released yesterday, pointed to incompetent Tory management in several areas, including:

- **The Family Responsibility Office.** The FRO tracks down ex-spouses who are behind on their child support payments. Or at least it tries to. OPSEU members working there have 890 cases needing attention, on average. That's more than twice the number for people doing the same work in Quebec (400 cases) and Alberta (335). The result of this understaffing? Ontario families have not received over \$1.3 billion in support payments they're owed. This has forced 23,000 families onto social assistance, costing taxpayers \$200 million a year.
- **The courts.** As of March 2002, 99,000 criminal charges had been waiting to be heard in provincial court for eight months or more. This is a 65 per cent increase over 1998. "The lack of [Ministry of the Attorney General] effort to collect millions of dollars in outstanding fines weakens the credibility of

the justice system," the auditor said. True enough. It's also wasting money that could be invested in making our courts work better.

- **Children's mental health.** The province funds about 250 community-based agencies that help children and families with mental health needs. The 2002-03 budget for these agencies was \$315 million. It's not a small number, but the auditor said that the Tories simply didn't know if the money was well spent. The Ministry of Community, Family and Children's Services "had not established service quality standards" and "was not receiving or assessing information from agencies about the outcomes of the services they were providing." Indeed, it looks like the ministry will sign off on **any** agency budget: one budget request included a \$178,000-a-year secretary. Shorter waiting lists for autistic children and those at risk of committing suicide would be a better use of those dollars.
- **Consultants and contractors.** The 2002 auditor's report zoomed in on the overuse of high-priced consultants in the public service. Nothing has changed in the 2003 report. The Integrated Justice Project was supposed to provide a new computer system for the courts, corrections, police, and Crown attorneys. It cost \$21 million over five years; it delivered absolutely nothing. When job actions by OPSEU members forced the Attorney General to do something about

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toxic mould at the Newmarket courthouse, a contractor won a competitive process to do \$52,000 worth of repairs. The final bill was \$23.8 million, with no further tendering of the work. Did taxpayers get their money's worth? We'll never know.

- **The “Innovation Trust.”** In March 1999, the Tories created the Ontario Innovation Trust. The Trust was created by a deal between the Tories and a private corporation named as the Trustee. The Tories gave the Trust \$750 million to pay for capital costs related to research at Ontario universities, colleges, hospitals, and research institutes. The Trust has spent \$240 million so far, leaving over half a billion in the bank. So who controls this money? Not the government. “[W]e observed that the Ministry receives virtually no information from the Trust and does not have the required monitoring process in place to ensure compliance with the trust agreement,” the auditor’s report said. “[T]he Ministry has no assurance that the Trust is spending public funds in compliance with the trust agreement. . . . The Trust is not required to report to the Ministry or through the Minister to the Legislature.” Critics are curious to know exactly why Tory enterprise minister Jim Flaherty made this kind of deal. “The Ministry will make its best efforts to ensure accountability,” the Ministry promised the auditor. “However, it should be noted that the Ministry does not have the authority to impose an agreement on the Ontario Innovation Trust. . . .” Sound like a scam?

### **Tories didn’t learn much from Walkerton**

After the Walkerton disaster, you would think the Tories would have bent over backwards to get drinking water quality under control. They didn’t.

The auditor reported that:

- Inspection activity at water treatment plants is only 73 per cent of 1995-96 levels.

- Only 54 of 357 private drinking water treatment plants were inspected last year, and only 44 of the 1,119 “smaller plants and designated facilities” were. Of these, over 20 per cent had never sent in any test results to the Ministry of Environment, and another 27 per cent had not sent in the minimum number of samples for E. coli bacteria and fecal coliform, two known killers.
- A \$17-million computer system, Environet, does not provide ministry staff with the information they needed to protect our air and drinking water.

In the public health system, thousands of high-risk food premises were not being inspected. The auditor reported that the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care did not know why public health costs varied widely from community to community.

### **Tories ignored reports**

Assistant provincial auditor Jim McCarter was clearly frustrated by many of the problems raised in the latest report. “Far too many concerns noted in our prior audits are not being satisfactorily addressed,” he wrote. “In some cases, these same concerns were raised almost ten years ago.”

“The Tories undermined our public services over years, not months,” said Leah Casselman. “These problems won’t be fixed overnight, but it’s our job now to make sure the Liberals know that OPSEU members – and all Ontarians – expect the new government to fix them.

“It’s time to **stop** letting private consultants run government and **start** hiring the staff we need to run services well and spend our money wisely,” she said. “All OPSEU members should let their MPPs know it.”

To read the provincial auditor’s report yourself, check the web at [www.gov.on.ca/opa](http://www.gov.on.ca/opa).