

Legislative Assembly of Ontario

Hansard record April 14, 2005

PUBLIC SECTOR RESTRUCTURING

Mr. Howard Hampton (Kenora-Rainy River): My question is for the Acting Premier. In the last election, you promised ordinary Ontario families you would rebuild our public services. Here is your record so far: 757 nurses fired, not hired; cuts to physiotherapy, optometry, chiropractic. And now we learn you're laying off 3,700 public service workers. That's one in 10 public service workers, whom we rely upon to deliver good-quality public services in the province.

Acting Premier, how do you square laying off 3,700 more public service workers with your promise to rebuild Ontario's public services?

Hon. Dwight Duncan (Minister of Energy, Government House Leader): I'm going to refer that to the Chair of the Management Board of Cabinet.

Hon. Gerry Phillips (Chair of the Management Board of Cabinet): I think the leader of the third party should -- perhaps he doesn't realize this -- kind of deal with the facts.

Firstly, in terms of the numbers, we actually have been rebuilding the public service. We now have about 1,400 more people working for the Ontario public service than when we took office. We brought in 450 people who were outside consultants, brought them back into the public service. We saved \$20 million doing that. We've added 200 health and safety workers. We've added 100 meat inspectors. So we are rebuilding the public service.

The numbers he talks about simply are possible plans that might happen. Two thirds of that, already announced, are basically psychiatric hospitals. The employees will stay the same. We are transferring them to community-based organizations, as I think the third party would agree is a good idea. So I would just hope he might deal here with the facts.

Mr. Hampton: Well, one of the facts is that 120 of these cuts will happen at the Family Responsibility Office. You should know that the Family Responsibility Office already cannot keep its commitments to children and women who need those financial support payments in order to pay the rent, put food on the table and have clothing on their backs. Since 1995, the number of caseworkers at the FRO is down by 20%; the number of cases is up by almost 50%. And now you're going to lay off another 120 staff.

Can you tell us, Acting Premier -- most importantly, can you tell those women and children -- how does laying off another 120 staff at the Family Responsibility Office help those women and children who need those support payments?

Hon. Mr. Phillips: You don't help by misstating the facts. These people are not being laid off. I again say to the third party, two thirds of these people who are in our plans are people who will be transferred to another employer -- psychiatric hospitals. In the particular case that you raise, that would happen only after the Family Responsibility Office has solved the challenges that are there, and it might happen.

So I would say to all of our public servants, these aren't layoffs. These are possible plans laid out for the last year for our unions. Two thirds of these are transferring employees to another employer, and in the case of the Family Responsibility Office, until the Family Responsibility Office has solved its problems, nothing is going to happen there.

I would urge the leader of the third party: Calm down -- we are going to work with our public service to make sure we rebuild the public service -- and do not rely on these scare tactics he's using here in the Legislature.

Mr. Hampton: The now Chair of Management Board wants people across Ontario to believe that the McGuinty government sends out layoff notices for the fun of it. Let's be clear about the facts. You're the person who a year and a half ago, in June, said there was a possibility of a \$5-billion deficit. Then, when you're hit with a \$5-billion deficit, you say, "I didn't hear about it. I didn't know about it."

If there's anybody who is a stranger to the facts around here, Minister, you are. This concerns some of the most vulnerable children and women in this province. The Provincial Auditor has said over and over again that they are not well served by the Family Responsibility Office. The Provincial Auditor has said that this office needs more staff, better trained staff, more experienced staff, and what do we see? One hundred and twenty staff there are getting layoff notices. So tell those women and children who already wait, in some cases seven months for action on their child support payment files, how laying off another 120 staff is going to --

The Speaker (Hon. Alvin Curling): Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Mr. Phillips: Again I say to the public: There are no layoff notices. No layoff notices have occurred. He's making it all up. There are no layoff notices. These are simply plans required, I might say, by law. By law we are required to disclose possible plans for the next two years. There are no layoff notices.

In terms of what he is talking about -- the people I think he is talking about -- that there are 120 of them, 40 of them have not even been hired yet. So I would say to the leader of the third party, do not use the term "layoff notices." There is no such thing. These are plans over the next two years that may or may not happen. Two-thirds of them are simply transferring these employees to another employer, and the other third, as I say, may or may not happen. I would also add that in those same plans, there are another 1,400 people that we're adding, which offsets the number you're talking about in any event.

The Speaker: New question.

Mr. Hampton: To the Acting Premier again: Let me say that I don't think women and children who are already waiting seven months too long for child support payments get any sort of confidence from this minister.

I want to ask about the 72 layoffs at St. Joseph's health centre in London. Your underfunding of our hospitals is forcing St. Joseph's to cut \$8 million from mental health services and to lay off staff in mental health services to cover the underfunding. This will mean more service cuts for vulnerable people who need help, and it will mean more trouble for other social service agencies. Can you tell us, please: You said you were going to improve public services. How does laying off another 72 people in mental health services help rebuild our public services?

Hon. Mr. Duncan: I'll refer that to the Minister of Health.

Hon. George Smitherman (Minister of Health and Long-Term Care): If the member were interested at all in the facts, he would know that the circumstances in London are such: Many years ago, the province of Ontario divested operation of the psychiatric facility in that area to St. Joseph's Health Care. As part of that, there has been a long-standing plan, which is now being acted out, to push more of those services down to the community level. This is consistent, I believe, with what have been the values, as previously expressed, of the third party. This is entirely consistent with that, and very reflective of the commitment of a government that made the first increase in 12 long years to community-based mental health, \$65 million, a legacy, sir, that I could remind you began on your watch when you began your deprivation situation for health care in Ontario.

Mr. Hampton: I find it interesting that the Minister of Health says that laying off 72 workers who work in mental health is going to improve services.

I want to ask next about Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton. During the Hamilton East by-election, the McGuinty government promised to help the gardens work through some financial difficulties. In fact, they promised money to help address that. On April 1, the McGuinty government announced \$3.8 million in new funding, but guess what's tied to it?

What's tied is a requirement that 23 of the 44 staff be laid off and, through contracting out, a whole lot of other services be taken away from the staff who work there. Can you tell us, please, how does laying off 23 of 44 staff there help to rebuild public services in Ontario?

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Hon. Mr. Smitherman: I refer this question to the Minister of Culture concerning your allegation about 23 layoffs at Royal Botanical Gardens.

Hon. Madeleine Meilleur (Minister of Culture, minister responsible for francophone affairs): I just wanted to say to the House that there is a negotiation going on presently at Royal Botanical Gardens. As the person who asked the question knows, it would be improper for me to answer if there are any layoffs or not.

Mr. Hampton: During the Hamilton East by-election, the McGuinty government had no problem making this announcement. The McGuinty government had no problem saying that there will be help there for Royal Botanical Gardens. But now, when we find that the financial help carries with it the firing of 23 of 44 staff and the contracting out of a whole bunch of services, suddenly the McGuinty government doesn't want to answer. Tell us, please. This is your promise. This is what you were so happy to promise during the Hamilton East by-election. What happened to your promise? How does laying off 23 of the 44 dedicated staff there equal rebuilding Ontario's public services?

Hon. Mrs. Meilleur: Royal Botanical Gardens is a very important institution in Hamilton and in Ontario. We are working very closely with the board of directors and with the city of Hamilton and the regional municipality of Halton to make sure that Royal Botanical Gardens is with us for a long time. There has been a consultation with the community, so we know very well what the community and the municipality want. The board is reviewing the recommendation, and they will come up with a decision on the recommendation.

We have not been sitting here. I requested a review of Royal Botanical Gardens. I was not standing there looking at Royal Botanical Gardens' deficit year after year, like the previous government did.