

OPINION
& EDITORIALS

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The CENTRAL NEWSPAPER

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Ontario taxpayers foot the bill as transit costs spiral out of control

By Jay Goldberg

The Ford government priced the Ontario Line at \$10.9 billion. Seven years later, taxpayers face a bill of at least \$34 billion. At a time when government debt is soaring across the country, it's time for Canadians to demand that politicians be upfront about the cost of big projects before moving forward with them.

Last week, it was reported that the Ford government's Ontario Line, a 15.6-kilometre rapid transit project set to run through the heart of Toronto, will cost at least \$34 billion.

For context, when the project was first announced back in 2019, the Ford government pegged the cost of the new transit line at \$10.9 billion. In other words, the cost of this transit line has tripled in seven short years. And we're still at least half a decade away from the project's completion, meaning costs will surely balloon further still. The Ford government and Metrolinx, the Crown corporation tasked with building the new transit line, blame supply chain shocks and trade uncertainty for the cost surge. "When the Ontario Line began as a project, we lived in a different world in respect of major capital project delivery," said Metrolinx CEO Michael Lindsay.

That may be true. And that may justify part of the spike in the cost of the Ontario Line. But does anyone seriously believe that supply chain and trade issues could cause the cost of the project to more than triple, with further cost increases almost certain to come in the years ahead?

Whatever the explanation, taxpayers were told in 2019 that the Ontario Line would cost \$10.9 billion. Today, they're being told it will cost at least \$34 billion. Taxpayers deserve to know how that happened.

Now that the government has already spent billions of taxpayer dollars on the project, taxpayers are past the point of no return. We're on the hook for the cost of this new rapid transit line, and there's very little taxpayers can do about it.

But had the public been better informed in 2019, resistance to the Ford government's proposal would likely have been stronger. Selling the public an infrastructure project with a \$10.9-billion price tag is very different from selling the public an infrastructure project that will cost well over \$30 billion.

Even transportation researcher Jonathan English, a major proponent of the Ontario Line, told CBC News that it's hard to determine why the Ontario Line is so expensive "because unlike in other jurisdictions...we don't have a lot of transparency around what the specific line items are."

Taxpayers ought to know what's driving up these costs. We should know what the specific line items are. And there's no good reason why taxpayers in other jurisdictions receive more information than Ontarians do. That lack of transparency matters because taxpayers are now committed to a project costing more than three times what they were originally told, without being able to see clearly why. The Ford government can hide behind Metrolinx when it comes to cost overruns, yet Metrolinx is incredibly secretive and won't share important cost information with the public. This arrangement allows politicians to largely get off the hook for this bungled transit line and place the blame on bureaucrats. But it was the Ford government, back in 2019, that told the public the Ontario Line would cost \$10.9 billion. So the Ford government, to a certain extent, must be held to account.

When it comes to major transit projects in the future, governments should be required to show the public independent analysis and clear cost projections when pitching major initiatives to the public. We shouldn't have to rely on the word of politicians because, far too often, they're wrong. Instead, we need to see where these cost projections come from so we can independently assess whether the government is lowballing the cost. Most importantly, taxpayers need that information before governments commit billions of dollars and projects reach the point where there is little realistic opportunity to turn back. The present approach, in which governments seem to pick numbers out of a hat and offer the public little to no explanation of where cost estimates come from, cannot continue.

At a time when government debt is soaring, taxpayers deserve full transparency about the costs of government initiatives before they move forward. By the time the bill has tripled and taxpayers are on the hook, that transparency comes far too late.

It's not too late to abolish the Indian Act

By Brian Giesbrecht

The Indian Act was meant to be temporary, but instead created a permanent legal divide that should be abolished. While only one per cent of the Canadian population lives on Indian reserves, that tiny population is constantly in the news. From court cases that pit Aboriginal title against established property rights to First Nations challenging Alberta's independence referendum process, their increasingly aggressive demands fill our courtrooms and newspapers. All of this flows from one statute passed early on: the Indian Act, which creates a system for reserve residents that is very different from the rules and laws that apply to everyone else. It is regarded as a relic of the past, but attempts to get rid of it over the years have all failed.

Why did we need it? The foundation of the Indian Act was the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857, which was itself based on recommendations from the 1844 Bagot Commission. Until that time, the colonial government had treated Indians only as tribes. During early colonization, when the French and British were fighting for control of the continent, this made sense. The various tribes allied with them in ways that suited each party's agendas.

But as the fur trade waned and settlers began arriving, it was clear that Indians would have to adapt to the white man's world. This would not be easily accomplished. Indians of the Northwest had resided from 1670 to 1870 mainly within Rupert's Land, which offered virtually nothing to the inhabitants in the way of government or educational opportunities. Worse still, disease, intertribal warfare and whisky had decimated the small, scattered Indian population.

Canada's founders concluded that the only solution to what was even then known as "the Indian Problem" was to place Indians in a special legal category as registered or "status" Indians. They were made "wards in tutelage," similar to children in school, and placed on reserves, where they would be temporarily protected and educated before being left to fend for themselves.

But not all Indians were made "status" Indians. An Indian who graduated from university or entered certain professions could automatically lose his status through enfranchisement. The thinking was simple: he was presumed to be literate, capable and independent. It's necessary to look at the terms "assimilation" and "enfranchisement" because they are both largely misunderstood.

First of all, "assimilation" does not necessarily mean "forced assimilation." Indians could choose to become ordinary Canadian citizens through "enfranchisement," although the law also forced enfranchisement in some circumstances. Another term for "assimilation" is "integration." That was the same policy applied to all of the settlers arriving in Canada from different parts of the world. Both settlers and Indians were free to keep as much as they wanted of their culture and ethnic identity.

The next step was for the Indians to gradually become part of mainstream Canadian society by a process called "enfranchisement." The term "enfranchisement" is associated with voting. But it meant much more. An Indian choosing to be enfranchised was eligible to receive a per capita share of his band's trust funds and an allotment of 50 acres of reserve land in fee simple. He could stay on his reserve or sell his land to an Indigenous or non-Indigenous purchaser and move off the reserve. Reserves would gradually morph into stand-alone municipalities or merge with existing ones. In time, the reasons for a separate Indian system would disappear. Indians would be Canadian citizens with equal individual rights. Tribal rights would be a thing of the past.

It didn't work out that way. The federal government made the enfranchisement process unnecessarily complicated. More importantly, the chiefs did not want to see their band proceeds and reserve lands devolve to individuals, so those desperate to find a better life off reserve left with nothing.

They arrived in cities completely unprepared for modern life. A short walk north on Winnipeg's Main Street graphically reveals the results. The myth that enfranchisement failed because Indians wanted to hold on to their culture is false. According to the 2021 census, 59.4 per cent of First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status lived off reserve. They left because reserve culture had given them nothing. They would gladly have accepted an enfranchisement that would have put some money in their pockets. But enfranchisement failed. So the vision of our founders—that the separate Indian system would naturally come to an end—did not happen. A race-based system that was meant to offer temporary protection has now become entrenched. The Indian Act has outlived its purpose and should be abolished.

Letters To The Editor:

WHAT IS ON YOUR MIND? Send letters to newspaper@ocentral.com

Dear Editor:

Living in Oshawa is becoming harder every year, and ordinary working people are feeling the pressure from every direction. This is a city built by hardworking families, tradespeople, seniors, small-business owners and people who believed that if they worked hard, paid their bills and contributed to their community, they could build a decent life. Today, that promise feels like it is slipping away.

The cost of housing has become overwhelming. Rent is out of reach for many people, and home ownership is becoming little more than a dream for young families. Seniors who spent their lives building this community are watching their property taxes, grocery bills, utilities and everyday expenses climb while many live on fixed incomes. People are working longer hours and still struggling to keep food on the table.

Families are being forced to make choices they should never have to make: groceries or the hydro bill, medication or rent, gasoline or another household expense. Parents are worried about what kind of future their children will have when even a modest apartment can consume such a large portion of a paycheck.

At the same time, many residents look around their neighbourhoods and feel that the quality of life they once knew is changing. Homelessness, addiction, mental-health struggles, public disorder and concerns about crime cannot simply be ignored or explained away. The people suffering on our streets deserve compassion and meaningful help, but residents and business owners also deserve safe neighbourhoods, clean public spaces and a city where they feel comfortable walking downtown or operating a business. Small businesses are struggling too. They face rising costs, higher rents, taxes, insurance, wages, utilities and fewer dollars in the pockets of customers. These businesses are the backbone of our community, yet many owners feel as though they are being asked to carry more and more while receiving less in return. And through all of this, taxpayers continue to hear about new spending, new programs and new projects. There comes a point when government at every level must understand that taxpayers are not an endless source of money. Before asking residents for another dollar, every level of government should be asking a much more important question: Are we spending the money we already collect wisely?

Oshawa residents deserve accountability. They deserve responsible taxation. They deserve roads and infrastructure that are properly maintained, emergency services that can respond when needed, neighbourhoods where families feel safe, opportunities for young people, support for seniors and real solutions for those experiencing homelessness and addiction. Most importantly, residents deserve to feel that someone is listening. There are many wonderful things about Oshawa. We have strong neighbourhoods, proud families, tremendous history and people who genuinely care about this community. That is exactly why so many residents are frustrated. They know what Oshawa has been, and they know what Oshawa could be. People are not asking for luxury. They are asking for affordability. They are asking for safety. They are asking for accountability. They are asking for the opportunity to work hard, raise a family, retire with dignity and enjoy the community they helped build. That should not be too much to ask. Oshawa belongs to its people. It is time their struggles were heard, their concerns were respected and their interests were placed first.— **Ward 1 Oshawa Resident. Coleen Harris.**

Dear Editor:

I have to admit that I am confused by the number of candidates running for municipal office in Ajax. Every election we hear the same message: it is time for change. Candidates tell us that the incumbents have failed, that taxes are too high, that services are not good enough, and that they can do better. But I have a serious concern. What happens if we get rid of experienced incumbents only to replace them with people who give us even worse representation? Change for the sake of change is not always progress. As voters, we need to look beyond campaign signs, slogans, social media posts and promises. We need to ask serious questions about the people who want to represent us. Do they understand how municipal government actually works?

Do they understand budgets, taxation, infrastructure, planning, public safety and the responsibilities that come with spending taxpayers' money? Are they running because they truly want to serve the community, or because they simply want the title? There are certainly reasons to criticize some incumbents. No elected official should believe they are entitled to remain in office forever. If they have stopped listening to residents, wasted taxpayer money, failed to provide leadership or forgotten who elected them, voters have every right to replace them. But we should also be careful not to assume that every new candidate will automatically be better. Experience matters. Knowledge matters. Judgment matters. Most importantly, integrity matters. Municipal government affects our lives every single day. Our property taxes, roads, parks, neighbourhood development, local services and the future direction of Ajax are all influenced by the people we elect. That is why this election should not become a popularity contest. Before we vote someone out, we should know exactly who we are voting in.

Candidates should tell us clearly what they stand for, what they would change, how they would pay for their promises and what experience qualifies them to make important decisions on behalf of the people of Ajax. I want better representation, just like many other residents. But I do not want to trade representation that may be imperfect for representation that could be far worse. Ajax voters should demand more than promises. We should demand competence, accountability, experience and a genuine commitment to serving the public. This election, we need to choose carefully. Sometimes change is necessary. But the wrong change can cost taxpayers and our community for years. — **A Concerned Ajax Resident. Howie Charles**

Dear Editor:

This is not Halloween. I am not opening the door to these so called politicians. The other day some candidate knocked on my door. I opened and there stood someone with a flyer in hand trying to persuade my vote. I asked him about taxes. He did not know the answer only empty promises... sadly I learned that this was one of the incumbents. Thank you but no thank you. I am saddened to think that these are the people that represent us. No wonder our city is the way it is. **A Concerned Pickering Resident. Carla Stein**



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