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ONTARIO ELECTION 2022

CLIMATE CRIME #10

Eliminating Ontario's Environmental Commissioner: A watchdog is put down

In her last report (2019), the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario sharply outlined the direction in which the Ford government was moving:

Ontario recently cancelled its climate-polluter-pay system, and most other programs to reduce fossil fuel use. Without effective government action to conserve energy, especially fossil fuels, Ontario will continue to damage its finances, climate and well-being.

In our 2015/2016 Energy Conservation Progress report, we indicated that Ontario provides more than half a billion dollars in tax concessions each year to support fossil fuel use.

Natural gas use receives an additional subsidy.¹

Nine months after taking office, Doug Ford had summarily dismissed the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario. The Commissioner had been an independent officer of the Legislature, a twenty-four person staff at her command.

The Ford government claimed that it was just a cost-cutting exercise. It transferred a few Commission staffers to the office of the provincial Auditor but completely eliminated the Commissioner's position. Environmental Defence, an advocacy group, described the move succinctly: "the watchdog has officially been kenneled."² Indeed, the watchdog had been put down.

Ontario's Environment Commissioner was officially charged with upholding the province's Environmental Bill of Rights. The Commissioner reported directly to the Legislature on the success or failings of environmental initiatives such as the renewable energy promoting feed-in-tariffs. Her final full report even examined urban sprawl as it affected the air we breathe, the food we eat and the water we drink. Rampant sprawl would become a lightning rod for those alarmed by the government's Make-Ontario-Paved-Again approach.

The Ford Fallout:

"I'm dreading the day my grandchildren look at me and ask, 'Why did you let this happen to us?'"

- Dianne Saxe, the former environmental commissioner of Ontario, on the dissolution of her office.

This final missive had deployed a skilled team of data crunchers, economists, and scientists to assess whether the government was meeting its energy conservation goals and targets for greenhouse gas reduction. The work showed, with simple graphs and plain English, what the government of the day (Doug Ford had been elected in June 2018) did not want to hear: that the job of facing the climate crisis could be tackled with measurable goals, economic



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incentives to cut energy use and an imaginative approach to new housing codes and retrofit standards.

Most were likely unaware of one of the Commissioner's most important jobs: assessing the applications by industry and government departments under the Environmental Bill of Rights. It had teeth. This scrutiny of energy and conservation initiatives meant that an independent office would assess the goals and later the outcomes of costly programs as they directly affected a key environmental goal -- reducing greenhouse gases.

That went along with an Environmental Registry to which Ministries that could affect the environment had (and still have) to submit their proposals. The public

continues to have the right to comment and sometimes request a review of proposals considering their environmental impact. But the Commissioner had more power than individual citizens and advocacy groups because she had a team to evaluate proposals, reporting directly through the Legislature and informing the relevant Ministry.

The Environmental Commissioner's voice is sadly missed as Ontario heads into an election in which the shadow of the climate emergency hangs heavily over Premier Ford's record.

A good start to redressing these initiatives would be a reinstatement of the position of the Environmental Commissioner with a mandate to once again issue timely audits, suggesting practical targets on climate action.

¹ https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/reporttopics/envreports/env19/2019_EnergyConservationProgressReport.pdf (pg.5)

² <https://environmentaldefence.ca/2018/11/23/environment-commissioner/>