



Speaking Out Project: Periodic Report #2

**Act in Haste ... The Style, Scope
and Speed of Change in Ontario**

by

Kate Bezanson and Fraser Valentine
with the assistance of the *Speaking Out* Team

January 1998

Speaking Out Project: Periodic Report #2

**Act in Haste ... The Style, Scope
and Speed of Change in Ontario**

by

**Kate Bezanson and Fraser Valentine
with the assistance of the *Speaking Out* Team**

January 1998

Copyright © 1998 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

ISBN 1-894159-93-8

Published by:

The Caledon Institute of Social Policy
1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7
Phone: (613) 729-3340
Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
Website: www.caledoninst.org

Introduction

Since its election in 1995, Ontario's Conservative government has implemented unprecedented change in most areas of public policy. As just one example, during the second week of January 1997 (now known as MegaWeek), the Conservative government introduced major new legislation and programs involving municipal restructuring, education, social housing, welfare, property tax assessment and public transportation. The government not only has initiated wholesale change in almost every corner of public life in Ontario, it also has introduced changes to the way business is conducted in the Legislature and government offices.

This report is one part of a larger three-year longitudinal study in which members of 40 Ontario households are being interviewed to assess the impact of tax and spending cuts on citizens. For a comprehensive discussion of the overall study, its approach and methodology, please see the *Speaking Out Project Description, Research Strategy and Methodology* report.

Ordinarily, most people do not spend much time thinking about what is going on at Queen's Park and certainly not about the manner in which the provincial government goes about doing its business.¹ Nor were *Speaking Out* participants asked specific questions about the pace and scope of program and policy change in Ontario. Instead, we focussed our attention on the broad concerns people have in their daily lives, especially relating to policy changes implemented by the current Ontario government.

However, to our surprise, we found that among the people we interviewed – no matter what their income level or geographic location – the pace and manner of change were recurring themes.² In a majority of our interviews, we heard individuals expressing anxiety over the speed of policy change and the lack of consultation by the government on

central pieces of legislation. The amount that the government is trying to do, its haste and the way in which it goes about its work leave many of those with whom we talked struggling to comprehend the implications of changes at Queen's Park for their daily lives. The concerns that interviewees raised led us to examine how policy change is happening in Ontario under the Conservative government.

What are Ontarians saying about the speed, scope and style of policy change?

Frank is a 33-year-old social service worker in Toronto who is uneasy with the process of government policy-making in Ontario.³ He observes:

I think there are so many changes happening so quickly at the provincial level that it's hard to keep up. And there isn't ... communication... . There's a lot of secrecy. There's not a lot of consultation going on at the community level... . There is this overwhelming sense that it's just a steamroller of changes happening and it's happening ... all over the place and none of it's good. I get overwhelmed by ... the quietness, and then all of a sudden, boom, something will happen.

Similarly, Angie, a 35-year-old apartment building manager in Ottawa and single mother of two young boys, raises concerns about the lack of accessible information. She feels that she cannot make an informed decision about the implications of many policy initiatives because legislation is made into law in great haste and without meaningful public consultation. Although she supports some of Harris's ideas, she says: "*The information sucks – the information out to the regular Joe like me and my neighbours.*"

Our interviews uncovered suspicion about the government's motivations for this style of governing. Elizabeth, a social worker in her 30s, lives with her housemate, Sabrina, in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). She says:

Part of [the Ontario government's] strategy is to keep us feeling overwhelmed so we feel like we can't do anything... . You can't keep up and you don't protest, you don't go to protests, you don't write letters, you don't make telephone calls because it's a done deal.

We also found concern and anxiety about the level of public debate around fundamental changes to life in Ontario. Our research questions were not framed to ask specifically about the process of government policy-making, yet it emerged as an area of broad-based concern for those we interviewed across the province. These concerns are widely shared: A recent *Toronto Star* survey found that 54 percent of people in the Greater Toronto Area felt that “things are changing way too fast.”⁴ Nor are these concerns unfounded. The Conservative government is noted for its introduction of bills that encompass a range of policy issues and become law in a relatively short period of time. Examples include the Omnibus legislation (Bill 26), introduced in December 1995, the legislation introduced during MegaWeek and, more recently, changes in the rules that govern the amount of time allotted for debate in the Ontario Legislature.

This report does not analyze the content of policy changes; rather, our goals are to document the sheer mass of important laws the government has passed, to discuss the ways it made them law and to talk about how this style of governing is affecting people in Ontario. We have compiled a chronology documenting significant policy decisions implemented by the Ontario government since coming to power in June 1995 (see Appendix A). Although any number of legislative changes from this long list could be examined in greater

detail, we have chosen to focus on five areas that were identified as especially important to the lives of the people interviewed: public debate, municipal restructuring, health care, education and social assistance.

public debate

All governments in democratic societies should be interested in fostering informed public debate. It is the public forum that builds confidence in the policies adopted by governments and, in theory, leads to their re-election. However, a common criticism is that our Parliamentary system of government allows governing parties to use their majority of seats in the legislature to do almost anything – including introducing measures that effectively limit public debate. The Ontario government has adopted a number of provisions that limit the input of citizens, opposition political parties, the media and interest groups into the policy-making process. James, a 26-year-old homeless man in Toronto, observes:

This government doesn't care. They have enough seats to get [their policies] legislated through.

Mark and Jessie, a couple in their early 30s from a mid-size northern Ontario community, are concerned about the magnitude of the Conservatives' changes. Jessie likens the changes to a tidal wave:

You're not going to see the effects of that tidal wave until it washes over everybody.”

Angie, too, is concerned:

There's a lot of [changes happening right now] ... the municipal downloading of co-op housing ... that's going to impact me in my home and my job. And then there are the cuts to the health care system. I'm con-

cerned because I have a child that has an awful lot of health needs. There are the cuts and all the changes to the educational system, which affect me because I have two children.

While there are numerous examples of government actions giving rise to these kinds of concerns, we discuss the Omnibus Bill in greater detail as it is one of the prime examples of the Harris government's style of governing.

1. the Omnibus Bill

In 1995, the Ontario government introduced Bill 26, the *Savings and Restructuring Act* (known as the Omnibus Bill). This legislative package was far-reaching in that it affected 44 separate statutes, created three new Acts and repealed two others. The Omnibus Bill is more than 2,000 pages long.

This legislation lays the foundation for subsequent bills, such as the Megacity Bill (Bill 104) and changes in funding structures for municipalities. The Omnibus Bill covers such areas as health care, pay equity, municipal affairs, public employee contracts, environmental laws and freedom of information laws. Bill 26 gives the Minister of Health the authority to close or force mergers in Ontario's community hospitals. The government is authorized to set up the Health Services Restructuring Commission, composed of eight appointed members. The Minister of Health can eliminate hospital boards, take over hospitals in order to shut them down, and merge and decide on what services will be provided to the public. Additionally, Bill 26 gives huge powers to the Minister of Municipal Affairs to abolish local governments and to force mergers and amalgamations of local municipalities.

The range of public life which the legislation affects is extraordinary. Nevertheless, the govern-

ment first introduced the Bill in the Legislature just before the 1995 Christmas break when most MPPs were in their ridings. Further, the government made no provision for public hearings. It was only after opposition members staged a sit-in to protest the lack of consultation that the government agreed to hold three weeks of public hearings on the Bill. This behaviour, which came early in the mandate of the Conservative government, left some Ontarians uneasy about the commitment of the Harris government to well-established democratic procedures.

What has not been much talked about in the public forum is the notion of an Omnibus Bill in the context of our British style of parliamentary government. As James said earlier in his own way, our system is one in which a determined government has considerable power as long as it can keep a majority caucus on side. One of the only real checks on the power of the government is the legislative process itself, supposedly requiring even the most ruthless government to submit to parliamentary debate on each legislative initiative (most publicly during daily Question Period).

To ensure that parliamentary debate happens, the tradition of parliamentary procedure is that each Bill must deal with a single, coherent theme. While many Canadian governments introduce Omnibus Bills, they are careful to ensure that only 'housekeeping' is dealt with in an Omnibus Bill and that nothing substantial is included. This kind of legislation typically is used by governments as an administrative mechanism to make efficiently a large number of small adjustments without policy implications in a variety of areas (a common example is the correction of spelling errors).

By the traditional rules of the Legislature, the Omnibus Bill should have been ruled inadmissible by the Speaker. The government should have been required to break the Bill up into individual components and pass each one separately.

The requirement to deal with issues individually is a vital restraint on the powers of a government by requiring it to submit each specific initiative to debate. This requirement is meant to stop a government from just stapling together many different Bills, calling them a single Bill and passing the whole thing as a way of railroading the Legislature and minimizing debate. But the Speaker of the Legislature has unfettered powers to make a ruling and the Speaker at the time, the Honourable Al McLean, ruled in the government's favour.

While the participants in our interviews did not know of these parliamentary rules, they did express unease about the way things were being done and, without knowing the details, could see that something different and less democratic was going on.

2. parliamentary debate

The Ontario government has further limited debate in the Legislature by changing the rules affecting the way business is conducted at Queen's Park. Individuals we interviewed talked about these changes. Leo, a married textile worker in Toronto, states:

Harris forces things through, and that's not right. He forces ... how things pass [in the Legislature].

While Leo does not talk about changes in the rules governing debate in the Ontario Legislature, his comments speak to the speed at which laws are now made in Ontario. According to new regulations, introduced in June 1997, Question Period must end at 4 p.m. each day, even if its start is for some reason delayed.⁵ The government, however, can sit during the evening from 6:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. with no Question Period. Speaking times also have been reduced and regulations about recalling the Legislature have been changed,

leaving less time for opposition forces, both inside and outside the Legislature, to organize. Bills also may be introduced during the last two weeks of a session. These changes allow more legislation to be passed, in a shorter period of time, with less debate and less public and media scrutiny.

Christine, a home daycare provider who lives with her husband and son in a small southern Ontario town, contends that the Conservatives change the governing system to suit their own political ends. She says:

The people with the power change the rules. I have no power. I'm one little daycare provider so why would they care that I'm not happy. They don't.

Her suspicions are reflected in curtailed debate on controversial new legislation such as Bill 142, the *Social Assistance Reform Act*, and Bill 160, the *Education Quality Improvement Act*.

A tactic used by the Conservatives to speed up the legislative process on controversial Bills is to impose time allocation, which is the amount of time allowed in the Legislature for debate and public consultation on legislation. We found that since coming to power in June 1995, the Conservatives have used this tactic with 12 pieces of central legislation. (See Table 1). Of those 12 Bills, nine are in policy areas that interviewees identified as a concern. The Conservatives have imposed time allocation on legislation affecting municipal restructuring, education, social assistance, health care, public libraries and the labour market (see our report *Take It or Leave It: The Ontario Government's Approach to Job Insecurity*).

Public consultation was limited further in seven of the nine policy areas because the Conservatives imposed restrictions on the number of days legislative committees could consult with the public. (See Table 2)

Table 1
Bills Affected by Imposed Time Allocation Since June 1995

name of bill	date time allocation was imposed
Bill 7, Labour Relations and Employment Statute Law Amendment Act	Oct. 25/95
Bill 26, Savings and Restructuring Act	Dec. 12/95
Bill 99, Workers' Compensation Reform Act	Jan. 2/97
Bill 103, City of Toronto Act	Jan. 29/97
Bill 104, Fewer School Boards Act	Feb. 6/97
Bill 109, Local Control of Public Libraries Act	Sept. 8/97
Bill 136, Public Sector Transition Stability Act	Sept. 17/97
Bill 142, Social Assistance Reform Act	Sept. 4/97
Bill 148, City of Toronto Act	Sept. 8/97
Bill 149, Fair Municipal Finance Act	Oct. 2/97
Bill 152, Services Improvement Act	Sept. 16/97
Bill 160, Education Quality Improvement Act	Oct. 6/97

Table 2
Bills for Which Time Was Limited for Public Consultation

name of bill	number of public consultation days permitted
Bill 7, Labour Relations and Employment Statute Law Amendment Act	0
Bill 26, Savings and Restructuring Act	15
Bill 103, City of Toronto Act	15
Bill 104, Fewer School Boards Act	6
Bill 142, Social Assistance Reform Act	4
Bill 148, City of Toronto Act	2
Bill 152, Services Improvement Act	1
Bill 160, Education Quality Improvement Act	2

As described in greater detail below, the Ontario government has passed a number of pieces of legislation giving Cabinet Ministers broad legislative powers without requiring them to consult with or seek the approval of the Legislature. In effect, the Ontario government is governing by regulation, rather than seeking the confidence of democratically-elected representatives.

An especially undemocratic use of regulations is something commonly referred to as the ‘Henry VIII clause’ (because King Henry VIII wanted to rule by proclamation, overriding Parliament’s wishes) [Valpy 1997: A17]. This clause says that if a regulation made by a Minister is in conflict with any other statute, the regulation prevails. Such clauses exist in Bill 26, the *Savings and Restructuring Act*, and in Bill 104, the *Fewer School Boards Act*.

Again, these changes are technical and not commonly discussed. While *Speaking Out* participants did not know the exact details of the changes in procedures, some knew that the government had imposed changes on debate and public consultation. Many feared that these changes were meant to further restrict debate.

Liz, a retired woman living in Toronto, feels that if public debate is squelched, governments will not fully comprehend the implications of substantial policy changes:

They’re making policies on something they know nothing about because they’ve never had to face it. How can you make these people [the Ontario government] understand how others are suffering?

municipal restructuring

As noted, during the week of January 13 to 17, 1997, an unprecedented number of Bills affecting broad areas of public life were intro-

duced by the Ontario government. Beginning on Monday and ending on Friday afternoon, the government tabled proposals to alter the funding arrangements for supports and services that are shared between the provincial government and municipalities. The vast range of legislation announced during this week meant the implications of the changes could not be assessed readily by the public. Dalton McGuinty, leader of the opposition Liberal Party, said this was a tactic by the Conservative government to limit public deliberation on their proposals. “Public confusion [surrounding the changes] was not by accident but by design,” he told the *Ottawa Citizen* on January 27, 1997 [McGuinty 1997].

Table 3 outlines the areas of policy affected by the announcements made during MegaWeek.

The number of proposed changes introduced during this week left opposition political parties, municipal governments, the media, interest groups and the wider public overwhelmed. In each policy area, the government proposed to alter the way the province shared the cost to deliver services and supports that Ontarians use on a daily basis. The government did not, however, provide municipalities or the public with clear formulas for the new funding arrangements. Instead, only rough percentages were given. In fact, the final funding was not provided by the province to municipal governments until December 1997 – a stunning 12 months after the changes were proposed – despite the fact that changes take effect January 1, 1998. As a result, municipalities have not been able to inform taxpayers about possible tax increases. Not surprisingly, the November 1997 municipal elections saw widespread confusion among the electorate about the credibility of claims regarding taxes. Because final figures still had not been furnished to municipal governments, candidates were unable to give voters clear information about property taxes.

The changes announced during Mega-Week have altered significantly the administrative struc-

Table 3
Summary of Legislation Announced During MegaWeek
January 13-17, 1997

Day 1 Monday	Day 2 Tuesday	Day 3 Wednesday	Day 4 Thursday	Day 5 Friday
Education	Welfare Child Care Child Welfare Hostel Program Social Housing Public Health Long-Term Care Women's Shelters	Highways Public Transit GO Transit ⁶ Ambulance Ferry Services Airports Water & Sewage Public Libraries Police Prov. Offences	Tax Assessment	Municipal Grants

tures of government. The process by which these changes were announced to the public also has broad implications. The people we interviewed expressed distrust towards the government because of the speed, scope and lack of consultation on key public issues announced during this week, especially Bill 103 (the 'Megacity' legislation).⁷ Based on government actions during MegaWeek, Teresa, a 30-year-old student in Toronto, feels that the current Ontario government is not interested in altering its course, despite widespread public concern:

When people were doing marches against Megacity, I said, why are you doing this? Mike Harris has already made up his mind. It is not going to change anything. [Bill 103] is going to go through. You have no say. You have no vote. You have nothing.

Teresa feels powerless and believes people like her are targeted by the legislative activities of the Ontario government. Indeed, policy changes introduced by the government are affecting some Ontarians more than others, but the government's governing style affects all citizens equally. Restricting debate, overwhelming the

electorate with legislation and limiting public consultation harms every Ontarian – no matter what their income level or geographic location.

The most glaring example of the provincial government ignoring public debate was seen in Toronto during the referendum on municipal amalgamation under Bill 103. The Conservatives chose to ignore the Greater Toronto Area electorate's 70 percent rejection of amalgamation. They passed the legislation into law on April 21, 1997, creating a single tier of government representing 2.1 million citizens. The fact that the Conservatives ignored the results of a democratic referendum is surprising given the importance they previously said they placed on direct democracy measures. Their action, however, reinforces the perception that the Harris government is not concerned about undertaking broad public consultation on issues of concern to all Ontarians.

health care

Almost everyone we interviewed spoke about their experiences and concerns with Ontario's health care system. This is not surprising,

given the importance of health care in our daily lives. Some individuals expressed concern about understaffing at hospitals, others about the closure of hospitals across the province. Some discussed the new user fees that have been introduced for seniors and welfare recipients. A majority also voiced concern over the speed of changes in health care. In particular, individuals discussed the marked differences they saw in health care delivery as a result of funding changes and the haste of announcements concerning hospital closures.

In 1995-96, the total hospital budget for Ontario was \$7.3 billion [Ministry of Finance 1996]. In November 1995, the Ministry of Health budget was cut by \$1.5 billion, phased in over three years [Ontario Federation of Labour 1997: 16]. In April 1996, the Health Services Restructuring Commission was appointed by the government to do three things: make decisions about hospital restructuring; recommend changes to the Minister of Health on how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness (including cost effectiveness) of other elements of the health services system; and make recommendations for required community reinvestment.

The anxiety we found over the breadth and speed of changes to health care in Ontario was compounded by lack of consultation on the part of the government and the appointed commission. Hospitals, for example, had only one month to respond to the Commission's Report [Armstrong and Daly 1997: A1]. Their responses were effectively the only public consultations held concerning hospital restructuring. The Commission made few opportunities for meaningful input from the wider public into its activities and recommendations.

Sara, who comes from a high-income household in the Greater Toronto Area, supervises medical studies on health issues. Sara says:

There are so many changes happening at once. I think it's going to take people a long time to recover from some of these changes.

The Health Services Restructuring Commission was given wide-ranging powers over which hospitals and programs were to be cut or merged, but it has no authority to redirect any of the money it saved into community-based health care, for example. In fact, the head of the Health Services Restructuring Commission, Duncan Sinclair, called the provincial downloading of public health to municipalities "stupid" [Urquhart 1997: A1]. Much of the Commission's work now has been completed, and across the province 24 hospital closures, reductions in the number of beds in still-open facilities, and an estimated 70,000 staff layoffs have been announced (see Appendix B). Most of the savings from hospital closures will come not from closing buildings, but from "administrative efficiencies" (largely layoffs) and "clinical efficiencies" (setting new standards). These standards will require hospitals to "send patients home faster, do more day surgery, discharge anyone who could be treated elsewhere and stop admitting people who don't need the help of a full-fledged hospital" [Toronto Star 1997: A26]. This policy assumes that community-based services will provide the necessary care in people's homes. It is unclear, however, if home care is a stable community support. Again, Sara, who is presently supervising research on new approaches to home care, states:

One change that I'm watching extremely closely is what's happened to home care ... because there is going to be definitely a downgrading of services that people are going to get.

The people we interviewed were deeply concerned about reductions in hospital care. Frank, a counsellor who lives with his partner in Toronto, says:

I worry about the health care system. I had surgery last February and I know that there has been a serious deterioration in the health care system Recently other members of my family needed emergency care.... The nursing staff on the floor...were just wildly understaffed ...and could not provide care that ...we previously expected.

But it was not simply the understaffing that concerned interviewees. The scope of the changes in health care funding left some, like Sara, alarmed about the potential impact of government policies on public health:

Are we still going to see the immunization program? Are we going to start seeing more infectious disease? Public Health Inspectors even inspected restaurants: Are we going to leave it up to the restaurant owner, are we going to start seeing an impact because they're just cutting staff to nothing? We want to see how the cuts will play out with respect to things like public health.

For some, health care sector restructuring is but one of an array of changes affecting their daily lives. For instance, Teresa, a Toronto student with multiple disabilities, is fearful that hospital closures as well as restricted provincial funding for health services, such as counselling, will have a tremendous impact on her life. She depends heavily on welfare and social services because they traditionally fund most of her necessary medical equipment and medication. She says:

I'm always terrified [that drugs I need] won't be covered and will have to come out of my pocket. And without [my therapy], I can't even survive so there's no point in giving me FBA because I'm not going to be around if I don't get [therapy]... . I'm being affected

by the hospital cutbacks... . I go to two hospitals and those two hospitals are being closed.

Teresa's experiences point to the cumulative impact of policy change in one area such as health care. The direct impact of hospital closures is compounded by changes to welfare and attendant care services, discussed later in the report.

education

Education, like health care, is an area of significant concern for most Ontarians. Cuts to education funding, reductions in school boards and the number of trustees, and the proposed shift of education funding and decision-making to the province leave many of the people we interviewed apprehensive. As with health care, the provincial government established a non-elected committee, the Education Improvement Commission, to make decisions regarding the funding and delivery of primary and secondary public schooling. Several Bills have been introduced over the last two years that directly affect funding and staffing of public education. Notably, education funding restructuring was part of the series of legislative changes introduced during MegaWeek.

As with health care, household members spoke about the immediate and visible effects of restricted education funding. Anne, a single mother living in a small southern Ontario town, reflects on the reduction in help for her son, who requires special assistance because of a learning disability. She says she has noticed a lot of cutbacks to individual help for kids:

They're trying to help Travis build his self-esteem. There's only one special teacher that does that and she's only able to spend 15 minutes a week with Travis.

Janet, a self-employed woman in a mid-sized southern Ontario city, worries about access to programs outside the basic core curriculum. She says:

I've never asked [the kids] to pay for any of their school stuff... . We try as hard as we can to get the money from wherever so that they don't have to miss out... .

But now, she notes, the school year is financially hard on them:

It costs us about \$1,500. That was totally unheard of when I was in school... . [Music] is still part of the curriculum, but if you want to participate it's 20 bucks, which for one item is a lot of money... .

Melanie, who teaches English as a Second Language and has been involved with adult education for 18 years, is concerned about the government's style of implementing change. She says:

What the provincial government plans to do to the education system top to bottom is horrendous. They do not know what they're doing for a start. They haven't listened to people who know what they're doing. And they're taking a totally ideological fiscal approach to this sort of thing.

Cuts and changes to education have been significant. Grants from the province to school boards were cut by \$1 billion in the November 1996 Budget. Another \$400 million was cut from transfers to colleges and universities. Nearly \$200 million was cut from training programs. Junior kindergarten has been made optional, while Grade 13 is being phased out of Ontario schools. In addition, Bill 104, the *Fewer School Boards Act*, reduced the number of school boards from 129 to 72 and cut the number of school board trustees from 1,900 to 700. Bill 104 established the

Education Improvement Commission (EIC). The EIC was given a mandate to make recommendations to the Minister: Many of these recommendations were reflected in Bill 160, the *Education Quality Improvement Act*, introduced in October 1997.

At the time of the writing of this report, education stands out as one of the most significant areas of conflict in the province. Primary and secondary school teachers in public and separate school boards walked off the job in October 1997 in a two-week protest against the provincial government over Bill 160, which moves power over significant aspects of the education system from the school boards to the provincial Cabinet, in most cases giving the Cabinet power to enact laws through regulation. It is the proposed high level of centralization to provincial authorities, combined with the power to make decisions through regulation, that have many observers in Ontario concerned. Plans for further funding cuts also have been confirmed. The concerns of individuals that we interviewed echo the more recent teachers' challenge of Bill 160: Changes are happening too quickly and are too far-reaching.

Veronica, a mother of two living in the Greater Toronto Area, supported the platform of the Harris government, but now says:

I voted more to balance Ontario. I really did... . He's moved too far, too fast. His ideas were sound. The whole plan, I think, to a point, was sound. But ... they dove in and they let the chips fall where they may, and unfortunately, it's the children that are falling.

Veronica's comments show that education serves as an example of the problems with the speed, scope and style of policy change being implemented by the Conservative government.

welfare

The Conservatives were elected, in part, on a platform of radical welfare reform. One of their first acts as a majority government in 1995 was to reduce welfare rates for most categories by 21.6 percent and to restrict eligibility for assistance. The cut in funding, coupled with cuts to community service organizations and health care, have had a dramatic impact on many poor individuals' ability to survive and cope. Richard, who lives in a southwestern Ontario city, has AIDS and relies on a welfare top-up, talks about his medication:

I have to replenish that every month in Toronto. Twenty percent is not covered [by welfare] and this comes out of my pocket... I am also using the food bank, usually around the third week of the month, but always at the end.

Welfare recipients used to get prescription drugs at no charge; now there is a co-payment fee. Anne, a single mother living in a southern Ontario town, notes that the cut in welfare, combined with new user fees for drugs, have had a significant effect on her life. She says:

When your kids get sick and the prescription is not covered, then you have to borrow money ... and you're in debt for the next month. And then you have to worry about ... writing a post-dated cheque for \$2.00.

As this report is being written, the new *Social Assistance Restructuring Act* (Bill 142) has been passed into legislation. As proposed, this bill eliminates the General Welfare Assistance program, the Family Benefits program and the *Vocational Rehabilitation Services Act*. The new legislation includes the *Ontario Works Act* and the *Ontario Disability Support Plan Act*, and comprehensively changes the way welfare is funded and delivered in the province.

The *Ontario Works Act* covers all social assistance recipients except those who qualify for the Ontario Disability Support Program. In *Take It or Leave It: The Ontario Government's Approach to Job Insecurity*, we note that the introduction of mandatory work for welfare is being met with confusion and anxiety on the part of interviewees. This new legislation is far-reaching: It implements work for welfare for most recipients, refers to social assistance as a 'loan' in some cases (to be repaid) and alters the structure for appeals. It introduces new identification technologies to combat fraud, limits the length of time one can claim welfare and does not substantially create or replace training programs.

The proposed changes to social assistance are the most far-reaching since comprehensive welfare programs were introduced in Ontario more than 30 years ago. Yet the government allowed only four days of public hearings on the Bill. Almost all those who presented statements to the Standing Committee on Social Development argued that the speed with which the Bill was implemented and the short time allowed for public consultations were a deliberate strategy on the part of the government to limit debate.

The Ontario Social Safety Network (OSSN), for example, is "concerned that community consultation has been virtually non-existent as the government has moved ahead with the new legislation" [Standing Committee on Social Development 1997: 83]. The OSSN was asked to comment on Bill 142 without any opportunity to review the regulations that will govern so much of the content of the program itself. Low Income Families Together maintains that there was a lack of consultation before the introduction of Bill 142. It claims that: "The process of examining, reviewing and even building this bill is totally inadequate, as it directly affects the survival of over a million people, half of whom are children" [Standing Committee on Social Development 1997: 20].

The Steering Committee on Social Assistance is concerned about privatization initiatives, which it fears will limit public debate and government accountability. The Committee notes: “The government has already started to privatize some welfare services. Bill 142 creates the necessary legal framework for the government to privatize some or all of the welfare system on any terms and conditions the government chooses. Under Bill 142, the Ontario government could sell off welfare to private companies without political debate, public consultation or scrutiny. We do not believe the people of Ontario are ready to see welfare run for the profit of private companies at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable citizens without full public debate on such a radical shift in public policy” [Standing Committee on Social Development 1997: 35-36].

The households participating in the *Speaking Out* Project which were affected by the first round of cuts to welfare likely will see their circumstances worsen as a result of Bill 142. A future *Speaking Out* report will focus exclusively on welfare and the impact of Bill 142 on the daily lives of Ontarians.

Conclusion

This report has surveyed briefly some of the sweeping changes the Conservative government is bringing to Ontario. Our intent is not to discuss each policy area in detail, but to document the means and haste with which the Conservatives have carried out their mandate.

Many individuals we interviewed – whatever their community or income level – expressed concern about the pace of change, the lack of public information and the secrecy that marks the current Ontario government. Through a level of questions and discussion that goes beyond that possible in a short poll, we have found that people are far from indifferent to the way they are being governed. The Conservatives have shown little respect for the traditions of Ontario democracy, either in bringing public participation into the process of decision-making or even in respecting the norms of Parliamentary procedures. They have cut corners with democracy, and are causing deepening uneasiness among many people in Ontario.

Endnotes

1. Queen's Park is Ontario's Legislative Assembly, the home of the provincial government.
2. Our focus is on qualitative data, using open-ended interviews rather than polls or surveys. Therefore, we are not attempting to quantify the responses of *Speaking Out* participants.
3. All names of household members are pseudonyms.
4. The *Toronto Star* [September 15, 1997: B1; B8] commissioned a survey of 1,200 people across the Greater Toronto Area in September 1997 to "find out how people define their community and what they expect from government."
5. Question Period is the time allotted each day in the legislature when opposition parties can question the government on its actions. It is often referred to as the cornerstone of the Parliamentary system of government because it keeps the government's actions accountable to the Legislature and, by extension, to all citizens.
6. GO Transit is the acronym for Government of Ontario Transit, a commuter train in the Greater Toronto Area.
7. The Megacity legislation, Bill 103, merges the municipalities of Metropolitan Toronto into a single tier of government, the City of Toronto.

References

- Armstrong, Jane and Rita Daly. (1997). "Hospital cuts too deep, key panel warns group that drew tough blueprint for closings balk at latest plans." *Toronto Star*. March 22, A1.
- McGuinty, Dalton. (1997). "Ontario: Tories orchestrate MegaTragedy: Public confusion not by accident but by design." *Ottawa Citizen*. January 27, A7.
- Minister of Community and Social Services. (1997). *Statement to the Legislature. Legislative Assembly of Ontario Debates*. Toronto: Hansard.
- Minister of Finance. (1996). *1996 Ontario Budget. Ontario Legislative Digest*. Scarborough: Thomson Canada Limited.
- Ontario Federation of Labour. (1997). *The Common Sense Revolution: 2 Years of Destruction*. Don Mills, Ontario: Ontario Federation of Labour.
- Spears, John. (1997). "Your vision for region: Caring, safe, affordable." *Toronto Star*. September 15, B1;B8.
- St. Catharines Standard*. (1997). "Curtailing question time is democratic regression." September 13, p. 7.
- Standing Committee on Social Development. (1997). *Transcript of Hearings on Bill 142. Legislative Assembly of Ontario Debates*. Toronto: Hansard.
- Toronto Star*. (1997). "Numbers undermine hospital commission." March 20, A26.
- Urquhart, Ian. (1997). "Full steam ahead with revolutionary zeal, the Ontario Tories are making changes that will leave some people better off and flatten others." *Toronto Star*. January 18, A1.
- Valpy, Michael. (1997). "Henry VIII would have loved these guys." *Globe and Mail*. November 7, A17.
- Wright, Lisa. (1997). "Four hospitals ordered closed in Ottawa area. Runciman upset at commission's decision." *Toronto Star*. February 25, A2.

Appendix A

Tracking the Scope and Pace of Change in Ontario

The *Speaking Out* Project will publish a more comprehensive, detailed and explanatory record of the Conservative government's activities in the near future. The record will be updated periodically to provide an ongoing account of changes in Ontario.

1995

June 1995

- The Conservative government is elected with 44.8 percent of the popular vote and 82 of the 130 seats in the Legislature.
- A moratorium is declared on non-profit housing.

July 1995

- The first round of cuts is announced totalling \$2 billion.

September 1995

- The spouse-in-the-house rule is reinstated to cut single mothers off welfare if they are alleged to be living with a man.
- A three-month wait for welfare is imposed if an individual quits or is fired from his/her job.
- Youth welfare is restricted.
- A province-wide welfare fraud line is established.
- The minimum wage is frozen.

October 1995

- Ontario Training and Adjustment Board budget (1995-96) is cut by \$20 million.
- Welfare rates are cut by 21.6 percent (benefits for persons with disabilities on General Welfare also were subject to cuts).
- The government cancels 390 co-op and nonprofit housing projects (some already under construction).
- Solicitor-General closes 25 halfway houses whose purpose is to help reintegrate offenders into the community.
- The use of chain gangs of prisoners to clean up provincial highways is planned.
- Ministry of Labour loses 457 staff, cutting its size in half.
- Emergency shelters that provide front-line crisis intervention to battered women have their budgets cut by 2.5 percent with another 2.5 percent cut to be implemented in April 1996.

November 1995

- Bill 7, *Labour Relations and Employment Statute Amendment Act*, passes after the government introduces a motion to limit debate. It withdraws anti-scab provisions and alters the rules governing union certification and decertification.
- Bill 15, *Workers' Compensation and Occupational Health and Safety Amendment Act*, reduces the role of Workers' Compensation Board in supporting injured workers.
- Ontario Government Fiscal and Economic Statement is presented in the legislature, cutting \$5.5 billion in 1995-96.

- Health Ministry budget is cut by \$1.5 billion.
 - Hospital budgets are cut by 18 percent over three fiscal years.
 - \$365 million in 1996-97
 - \$435 million in 1997-98
 - \$507 million in 1998-99
- Grants to school boards are cut by \$1 billion over the 1995-96 fiscal year.
- Grants to universities and colleges are cut by 15 percent.
 - \$120 million for colleges
 - \$280 million for universities
- Junior kindergarten is made optional for school boards.
- Child care subsidies are eliminated.
- Provincial grants to municipal governments are reduced by 48 percent over the next two fiscal years.
 - Public transportation grants are cut by 21 percent over two fiscal years.
 - Public library funding is cut by \$12 million over two fiscal years.
 - The blue box recycling funding is eliminated.
 - Conservation authority budgets are cut by 70 percent over two fiscal years.
 - Rural communities are required to pay \$220 per household as a special tax for Ontario Provincial Police service.
- Funding to arts organizations (galleries, museums, public and non-profit broadcasters) is cut by 28 percent (\$220 million) in fiscal year 1995-96.
- The Legal Aid plan is cut by \$130 million in 1995-96.
- The Minister of Health is given authority to eliminate hospital boards, take over hospitals, directly shut them down, run them, merge them and decide what services will be provided.
- The Ontario Medical Association loses collective bargaining power.
- Freedom of Information laws are changed to make it more difficult to gain access to government information.

December 1995

- Bill 8, *Job Quotas Repeal Act*, repeals Employment Equity legislation.

1996

January 1996

- After the government passes a motion to limit debate, Bill 26, *Savings and Restructuring Act* (Omnibus Bill) is passed, creating three Acts, repealing two others and amending 44 statutes, including pay equity:
 - An estimated 100,000 women will lose \$81 million in pay equity payments.
 - The Advocacy Commission established by the previous NDP government is eliminated.
 - The Minister of Municipal Affairs is given power to abolish local government and impose mergers and amalgamations of local municipalities. The Bill passes into law after only three weeks of public hearings.

February 1996

- The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), with over 50,000 members, goes on strike to protect job security (strike ends in March).

March 1996

- The Ontario Advisory Council on Women's Issues is dismantled.

April 1996

- The practice of ‘business planning’ is announced for each government department with the initial goal of 10,600 public sector layoffs.
- The Health Services and Restructuring Commission is established to make decisions about hospital restructuring and recommend changes to the Minister of Health on the health care system.

May 1996

- The 1996-97 provincial budget is announced with \$8.2 billion in cuts and the implementation of a reduction in Ontario income tax.
- The Environment Ministry budget is cut by 36 percent and 752 positions are eliminated.

June 1996

- Ontario Works (workfare) is launched in pilot communities.
- Eight bills are introduced to eliminate “unjustifiable requirements, costs or delays to the normal activities of business and institutions” as part of the interim work of the Red Tape Review Commission.
 - Bill 61, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of the Attorney General)
 - Bill 63, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of Citizenship and Recreation)
 - Bill 64, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations)
 - Bill 65, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Tourism)
 - Bill 66, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of Environment and Energy)
 - Bill 67, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of Health)
 - Bill 68, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines)
 - Bill 69, *Government Process Simplification Act* (Ministry of the Solicitor General and Correctional Services)

July 1996

- Ontario income tax is cut by 3.5 percent.

September 1996

- The Ontario Training and Adjustment Board is eliminated.

October 1996

- Bill 81, *Fewer Politicians Act*, is introduced.
- Bill 82, *Family Responsibility Support Arrears Enforcement Act*, is introduced.
- Bill 86, *Better Local Government Act*, is introduced.

November 1996

- Bill 93, *Good Financial Management Act*, is introduced.
- Bill 96, *Tenant Protection Act*, is introduced.
- Bill 99, *Workers’ Compensation Reform Act*, is introduced.
 - Government introduces motion to limit debate on the Bill.

1997

January 1997

- During MegaWeek (Jan. 13-17) the following Bills are announced.
 - Bill 103, *City of Toronto Act* merges eight municipalities into a single tier of government.
 - Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill.

- Government introduces a motion to restrict public consultation of the Bill to 15 days.
- Bill 104, *Fewer School Boards Act*, reduces the number of school boards from 129 to 72 and the number of school board trustees from approximately 1,900 to 700.
- Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill.
- Government introduces a motion to restrict public consultation on the Bill to six days.
- Bill 109, *Local Control of Public Libraries Act*, increases the funding responsibilities for municipalities for public libraries.
- Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in September 1997.
- Municipal devolution of services for welfare, housing, long-term care and public transit is announced.
- Municipal Property Tax assessment guideline changes are announced.
- Ontario income tax is cut by a further 12 percent.
- The Red Tape Review Commission submits its final report, making more than 130 recommendations after consulting with firms, business and employers. In total, the work of the commission results in 17 Bills, repealing 45 Acts and amending another 181. The government introduces nine more Bills:
 - Bill 114, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation).
 - Bill 115, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Finance).
 - Bill 116, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs).
 - Bill 117, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations).
 - Bill 118, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Health).
 - Bill 119, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Natural Resources).
 - Bill 120, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Northern Development and Mines).
 - Bill 121, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of Environment and Energy).
 - Bill 122, *Red Tape Reduction Act* (Ministry of the Attorney General).
- The Government Task Force on Agencies, Boards and Commissions recommends limiting 12 agencies and redesigning 30 others as part of a targeted \$220 million cut to agencies, boards and commissions.

April 1997

- Bill 103, *City of Toronto Act* (Megacity Bill), is passed, merging surrounding municipalities into one level of government.
- Bill 104, *Fewer School Boards Act*, is passed, reducing number of school boards from 129 to 72 and reducing number of school board trustees from approximately 1,900 to 700.
- Budget for training programs is cut by 40 percent over two fiscal years.

May 1997

- The 1997-98 provincial Budget is announced, confirming that by the end of fiscal 1997-98, \$4 billion of the announced \$5.5 billion in cuts will be complete.
- Bill 84, *Fire Protection and Prevention Act*, is passed, removing collective bargaining rights from firefighters.
- Ontario Arts Council funding is cut by \$5 million (16.5 percent) for 1997-98 fiscal year by the Ministry of Culture and Recreation.

June 1997

- Bill 136, *Public Sector Transition Stability Act*, is announced, freezing collective bargaining for 500,000 public sector workers and enabling the government to implement the downsizing and reorganization of health, education and social service sectors. The Bill is later amended in response to pressure for a general province-wide public sector strike.
 - Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in September 1997.
- Bill 142, *Social Assistance Reform Act*, is announced, to replace the *General Welfare Assistance Act* and *Family Benefits Act* with the *Ontario Works Act* (workfare) and the *Ontario Disability Support Plan*.

- Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in September 1997.
- Government introduces a motion to restrict public consultation on the Bill to four days in September 1997.
- Bill 148, *Government Process Simplification Act*, is introduced.
 - Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in September 1997.
 - Government introduces a motion to restrict public consultation of the Bill to two days in September 1997.
- Bill 149, *Fair Municipal Finance Act*, is introduced.
 - Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in October 1997.

July 1997

- A total of \$4.2 million (50 percent) is cut from funding to 49 agencies such as the John Howard and Elizabeth Fry Society, which provide support and supervision for offenders.
- Ontario income tax is cut a further 2 percent.

August 1997

- Bill 152, *Services Improvement Act*, is introduced, downloading services from the province to municipalities and exchanging responsibilities.
 - Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in September 1997.
 - Government introduces a motion to restrict public consultation on the Bill to one day in September 1997.

September 1997

- Bill 160, *Education Quality Improvement Act*, is introduced, cutting preparation time, introducing non-certified teachers and limiting class sizes.
 - Government introduces a motion to limit debate on the Bill in October 1997.
- The rules governing the way business is conducted in the Ontario Legislature are changed: In particular, changes are made to limit debate in the House.

October 1997

- City of Toronto announces that provincial downloading of services will result in \$192 million extra in spending for the city.
- Premier Harris confirms that the government has targeted an additional \$600 million to be cut from the education budget, effective September 1998.
- Teachers unions representing 160,000 members leave the classroom to protest Bill 160. Approximately 1.2 million students are affected, making it the largest walkout of its kind in North America.

Appendix B

Overview of Health Care Sector Cuts by Municipality

Information for this summary was provided by the Ontario Federal of Labour, since the Health Services Restructuring Commission said they could not provide us with the information. Subsequently, the hospital closures and mergers were confirmed by the Commission.

Thunder Bay

Three of five hospitals to be closed
The number of acute care beds dropped
from 954 to 508
\$41 million cut from hospital budgets
870 full-time jobs potentially lost

Sudbury

Two of three hospitals to be closed
The number of acute care beds dropped
from 558 to 365
\$41 million cut from hospital budgets
915 full-time, 748 part-time jobs potentially lost

Ottawa

Two hospitals to be closed
Montfort, the city's only French-language hospital,
will have a reduced role, mainly providing ambula-
tory care
\$90 million cut from hospital budget
Between 2,000 and 4,000 jobs potentially lost

Toronto

11 hospitals and 14 emergency wards to close
\$430 million cut from hospital budget
10,000 jobs potentially lost

Peterborough

96 layoff notices delivered, 46 to nurses

Grey-Bruce Counties

The only hospital to cut 157 beds – 60 jobs lost

Belleville

The only hospital to cut 50 beds

Hamilton

Two of four hospitals to close
2,000 layoffs predicted
One of four hospitals to close

Kingston

Three of four hospitals announce restructuring plan

Sarnia

Two main hospitals to merge

Pembroke

One hospital to close
One-third of acute care beds cut
300 jobs potentially lost

Brockville

Psychiatric hospital to close
Services to move to Ottawa

London-St. Thomas

Both psychiatric hospitals to close by December
1999 and a smaller forensic psychiatric health
centre to be built.
1,500 jobs potentially lost
744 beds cut

Huron-Perth

406 beds cut
24-hour emergency wards to close

Reports available from the *Speaking Out* Project

Speaking Out Project Description: Research Strategy and Methodology
December 1997

Speaking Out Project Periodic Report #1
Take It or Leave It: The Ontario Government's Approach to Job Insecurity
January 1998

Speaking Out Project Periodic Report #2
Act in Haste ... The Style, Scope and Speed of Change in Ontario
January 1998