

## Strike? What strike?

**Rudyard Griffiths, Special To The National Post** Published: Wednesday, July 22, 2009

As Toronto's public service strike enters its fifth week, with no end in sight, an interesting social phenomenon is starting to unfold in Canada's largest metropolis: In bars, over dinner tables and around water coolers, Toronto's tax-strapped and recession-conscious denizen are all talking about how little their day-to-day lives have been effected by the strike.

Yes, there is the inconvenience of having to pay \$5 a bag to have garbage hauled away by the enterprising businessmen who come to your door. Yes, the city's main thoroughfares are starting to look like the gritty set of a CSI: NY episode. And, yes, if you are a parent with limited means who was counting on city summer camps and daycare, the last month has been downright awful.

But for the vast majority of Torontonians, this summer is much like any other. Given this state of affairs, more and more people are asking themselves: What exactly were the 30,000 strikers doing before they took to the picket lines?

Toronto is currently running on something like half of its total public service workforce. (While the entire city is thankful for the long hours its managers are working to keep essential services operating, they constitute a small fraction of the city's workforce.) Yet the impact of the strike on residents is nowhere near proportional to this massive loss of manpower. The streets are passable, stores and offices are going about their business and local neighbourhoods are holding summer fairs.

This is bad news for the union. The longer Toronto's strike goes on, the more Mayor Miller's rhetoric about the city's "hardworking" public workers rings hollow. More importantly, every day the strike continues, Torontonians are exposed to a basic fact about their city: It is massively over-serviced by its public sector.

Economists have postulated that somewhere on the order of one-quarter of government employees, at all levels, are pseudo-workers -- employees who contribute either marginally to core public services, or are employed in bureaucratic enterprises that have little or no lasting external effect outside government (think eHealth Ontario).

Such a state of affairs is increasingly unsustainable in a country such as Canada, with its less-than-stellar productivity, fast-aging population and slowing workforce growth.

As of 2020, 11 short years from now, the tab for health care and social services for our aging population-- when combined with the corresponding loss in tax revenues as the Baby Boomers exit the workforce permanently -- will soar to \$40-or \$50-billion annually.

I would argue Canadians are well ahead of government on these issues.

The public realizes that unless a bloated public sector is put on a slimming diet --and fast -- taxes and deficits will explode to pay for the entitlements of an aging society during the coming period of little or no real workforce growth.

The undeniably positive development to emerge out of Toronto's strike is the fiscal re-education of the great mushy middle of voters that constitute Canada's sixth-largest government by revenues. This group is receiving a powerful and long overdue object lesson that smaller and more efficient bureaucracies can deliver good quality public services and do so in a manner that anticipates the serious demographic challenges facing our country.

If you don't believe me, just visit Toronto--a once semi-socialist paradise that has become the unlikely poster boy for shrinking the size of government in Canada.

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