

Greenbelt Gaslighting

by SHERALYN ROMAN

By now, Ontarians are well aware of the scathing Auditor General report that finally, and irrefutably, confirmed what most of us already knew; that the greenbelt was indeed up for sale, but only to a select few.

While decimating the greenbelt is the worst kind of crime (from which the land will never recover) what has me in such utter disbelief is the sheer, unadulterated doubling-down of Mr. Ford and his housing Minister Steven Clark as they blatantly gaslight Ontario citizens. By claiming that the housing crisis is of such magnitude, with immigration causing us to burst at the seams, and no help coming from the federal government, they have little choice but to pave over protected land, they are actually conducting a master class in gaslighting.

For those who may have heard the term tossed around, often in discussions related to relationships, 'gaslighting' is defined by the American Psychological Association as 'manipulating another person into doubting their own perceptions, experiences of understanding of events.' It often manifests as 'shifting blame to another person in order to avoid accountability, which is also known as deflection.'

When it comes to the greenbelt, Ford is doing all of the above. He's blaming the feds for not stepping up to solve the housing crisis. He's redirecting attention to rising rates of immigration, tugging on heartstrings as he laments how we all want to live the Canadian dream to own a home. He's reminding us, using 'relatable' analogies that we're in a crisis and just like firefighters run towards a fire to help ? so too will he, Minister Clark and a trusty team of developers willingly run toward the greenbelt to build homes because there's simply no other alternative immediately available. Who doesn't love a good firefighter analogy? Who would refute the rights of anyone to dream of home ownership? Saying otherwise just makes all of us sound terrible and selfish. It's gaslighting 101.

Clark and Ford go so far as to 'acknowledge' mistakes were made. How very noble of them. As if we couldn't figure out on our own that envelopes passed around are not the way to conduct business, especially business that will result in the decimation of farmland, wetlands, watersheds and put species already at risk, further in harm's way. All to build affordable housing ? for those who can afford McMansions, that is.

In another example of classic gaslighter tactics, by acknowledging their mistake they are trying to pass themselves off as the good guys. I'm paraphrasing, of course, but 'Listen to us,' they seem to exclaim at a news conference, 'it should never have happened on our watch, we apologize. We even wholeheartedly stand by 14 of the 15 recommendations the auditor general made.' We're supposed to be so impressed by this statement that we ignore the one recommendation they very conveniently won't stand by ? reinstating greenbelt lands to protected status.

I don't know about you but I also found myself yelling at the TV as the Premier 'reminded' us how development fees are what pay for all the things we currently enjoy in our communities such as libraries, and sewer systems, roads and sidewalks. As if we won't recall that he recently waived developers' responsibilities to pay development fees, instead downloading infrastructure costs to municipalities (and us taxpayers), thus freeing up even more profits for those who had the foresight to buy land with 'no idea' if it would ever be profitable.

Except that they did know. Again, I'm paraphrasing but implying we can't have nice things without developer money is just another way to make us forget we're actually footing the bill for most of these nice things through our tax dollars. Just another example of gaslighting at work. If I were still teaching, I'd be rubbing my hands in glee at all the media sound bites this report has resulted in that could be used as teachable moments. It's too bad the government has collectively learned nothing about preserving and protecting the greenbelt.

I wonder how long the frenzy will last? Will government gaslighting work, once again resulting in no consequences to anyone, other

than perhaps Mr. Amato, the Chief of Staff, whom I feel may be ?encouraged? to take the blame? Will the media keep up the pressure? Will the opposition continue to query the government? With a return to the legislature not happening until the fall, and if I were a betting person, I predict the following outcome: Gaslighting -1, Greenbelt - 0.