

## ?Service,? Ontario Style

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Seeking service in Ontario? The province that's ?Open for Business? but not much else? Hoping to renew your license or have a knee replaced? Whatever you're looking for, if crossing the border to shop used to be your favourite pre-pandemic activity, no worries - you'll soon have the opportunity to receive a variety of services that rival any of those previously offered only in the US. In other words, services you'll have to pay for out of pocket. That's the new ?Service,? Ontario style.

There have been just a few announcements from the Ford government lately, including the recent re-announcement about making booze available in corner stores and grocery stores. Wait, insert pause here, isn't it already available in these locations, you ask? Yes, yes, it is, but I digress. The announcements I'm concerned about happened just in the last week or so and included this one, about ?expanded and enhanced? (quotes are mine) access to Service Ontario locations through two large retail outlets, at least one of which is wholly American owned. It was followed by recent assurances from Minister Jones that yet more health care services are coming our way with ?expanded and enhanced? (again, quotes are mine) locations to have knee and hip replacement surgeries done at private clinics. Lucky us. It seems ?Service,? Ontario style is getting more and more like America every day!

The idea that Service Ontario locations are ? in many instances ? independently owned and operated was news to many. Of the 270+ locations, only about one third are provincially run. The rest, privately run, earned a commission for each transaction they completed and many were family-owned businesses. I'm already not sure how I feel about finding out what some thought was a government run resource has been in private hands, but with this latest news, what I am sure of is that handing over responsibility to big corporate entities, particularly those that are American owned, is just wrong, and quite possibly not in our best interests. Surely if change was required, and these mom-and-pop Service Ontario locations (including some here within our own Caledon borders) were not allegedly meeting the communities needs, there were other ways the government could have intervened? To begin with, they could have used an open bidding process rather than making secret deals behind closed doors. Why Staples? Why Walmart? Perhaps Shoppers' Drug Mart parking lots weren't big enough? In case you missed it, apparently parking lot size was one of the considerations ranked as important in granting the contract to Staples. Or, maybe Galen was simply too busy to fulfill yet another request from his friend.

Claiming the move will enhance convenience for Ontarians, the government answered no questions about the secretive process, or why it has, in one instance, already reversed its decision to close and relocate a downtown Toronto location. CityNews reporter Richard Southern, who first broke the story, has been relentless in questioning the Ford government and on Monday of this week was able to confirm that, according to Mr. Ford, while the deal, ?at the end of the day (is) saving taxpayers over \$1 million? Ford also acknowledged that ?We're going to help them.?

?Them? being Staples and Walmart, not us taxpayers! It appears we'll be funding at least some of the retrofit costs associated with this transition but no business case has been put forward as to whether the cost of these retrofits will be more, or less, than the alleged savings for taxpayers. Reminds me of a certain other deal the Conservatives were a part of ? involving a highway we paid for years ago, and are still paying for the privilege of driving on now. The opposition was quick to react with the Green Party calling for the Auditor General to once again take a look at how the Ford government does business, and NDP critic Catherin Fife stating, ?This is not an expansion of service, but another attempt for Ford to quietly hand over more of our public services to private corporations.?

Finally, that Staples issued a job posting soon after the Ford government announcement, looking for a Regional Services Manager who would be ?responsible for the monetization of Service Ontario traffic? and to ?drive sales & profit results related to Service Ontario traffic,? simply adds to mounting suspicions around the deal.

If we weren't already incredulous, how could we not be after reading these job requirements? Be prepared to pay more ?folks,? that's ?Service,? Ontario style! (Oh, and I haven't forgotten, we'll get to those easily accessed hip and knee replacements another day!)