

The privatization of Ontario

By **Sheralyn Roman**

Ontario's slogan, under Premier Doug Ford, is 'Open For Business.' Respectfully, I think it's much more than that. We're not just 'open,' we are 'For Sale.' The privatization of Ontario including: land, water, health care, Regional Councils and now, at least in part, school boards all being sold off to the highest bidder, has gone from a trickle to a flood. In a real estate market where our children can't afford a home and everyone is paying sky high prices for groceries and gas, Ontario continues to sell off, tear down, dismantle and disrupt, and the only beneficiaries seem to be corporate interests and the centralization of control under the Premier's office.

Sure, school boards have not literally been sold off like Ontario Place, or shuttered like the Science Centre, but they are being significantly altered at the whim of yet another Minister and presumably with the Premier's express approval. This past Monday's announcement saw a further erosion of democracy as duly elected school board trustees (who represent your child's interest in the classroom) are being capped or removed altogether, and their role radically altered. The small amount of remuneration they received is being reduced further, to an amount that would barely cover the cost of gas to visit each school under their purview. Worse still, boards will now be run by someone with a background in business, not education, with the government calling it a move to bring 'responsibility back to the Ministry.'

Referring to trustees as a 'distraction,' (so disrespectful) and putting in place 'non-elected executive roles,' school boards will essentially now be run like a business. The CEO will bring the budget to the trustees who can 'weigh in' but not make changes to it and in the case of any disagreement, the final decision making would be referred back to the Minister of Education. So, in effect, much like 'Strong Mayor,' and now 'Strong Regional Chair' powers help the government control the growth and privatization agenda of towns and cities, so too will concentrating more power at the provincial level help the government to exert yet more control over school boards while not doing anything expressly clear to this observer that will help children and families.

Which brings us to land and water. No need to rehash the greenbelt scandal here or refer to Highway 413 (which, by the way, Caledon Council invites the public to a meeting on April 21, to approve 'oops, I mean 'comment on' the proposed Official Plan Amendment to implement it) these are topics already discussed at length here and often. But water? Under various bills, proposed sweeping legislation has the potential to literally put water into private hands. They would allow the government, under the control of the Minister for Municipal Affairs and Housing, to grant authority over water infrastructure to public corporations which would then have the power to impose fees and charges, all while answering only, and ultimately, to the Minister. The Region of Peel will be the test case the Minister says, with the aim, he states, of saving us all some money. What's the risk you might wonder 'if it's a public corporation?

First, there is nothing in the legislation to prevent it from becoming a privately owned entity. Additionally, water protections that prevent tragedies like Walkerton have been seriously weakened. All of this is happening while Caledon changes its Site Alteration Bylaw (causing millions of tons of potentially contaminated fill to be dumped here) and could also see a proposed blasting quarry operation, both of which would significantly increase the likelihood of contaminating our groundwater.

Long-time community advocate Keri Parfitt, who started her career just months after the Walkerton tragedy where, as a reminder, seven people died and literally thousands became ill, has an extensive background in water and environmental education having worked with several municipalities. She has done extensive research and notes in addition to weakening the Clean Water Act, 'the gutting of our conservation authorities over the past years and now their amalgamation, further erodes and also severely diminishes water protections.'

In her words, 'what could go wrong?'

Ontario is indeed for sale to the highest bidder. Our children won't get the educational experiences needed (and many of our most 'at

risk? students won't get the help they deserve) because they will be treated like nothing more than a commodity in a business transaction. Land across Caledon will continue to be rezoned, bought up, and destroyed at developers and the Premier's discretion, and while we are surrounded by water (as part of the 'Hills of Headwaters?') there will be nary a drop to drink that's safe, potable and accessible because groundwater will be contaminated by fill or disappear altogether as 'run-off?' from blasting quarry operations. All this decision-making power is being centralized into the hands of one person ? who'd rather change the law than release his phone records.