

MPs expect deal with auditor general in spending row

By **MATTHEW LITTLE**
Epoch Times Staff

PARLIAMENT HILL, Ottawa—Parliamentarians have taken a public opinion beating in recent weeks over their refusal to allow the auditor general to scrutinize their books. However, the issue could be resolved soon, said several MPs this week.

Auditor General Sheila Fraser asked Parliament to do a performance audit on their books but was denied by the Board of Internal Economy, a secretive all-party committee that oversees the workings of Parliament.

MPs have been hounded by questions about why they would refuse an audit and what they have to hide after all parties except the Bloc Quebecois voiced opposition to the scrutiny.

Many MPs have defended the decision, saying their books are examined in other ways and they don't want the auditor general casting judgements on what they do.

On Wednesday, Government House Leader Jay Hill told reporters his party had agreed on a possible compromise that could appease the auditor general while blunting the concerns of parliamentarians. He would not spell out the details of that deal, saying it still needed to be discussed at the Board of Internal Economy.

Joe Comartin, Deputy House Leader for the NDP, voiced similar optimism on Tuesday, saying he hoped a compromise could be reached that would give Canadians a clearer view of how Parliament spends its money but would not grant Fraser powers he doesn't think she should have.

"She's in a conflict. A public servant should not be making the judgement calls that a performance audit would require her to make. If she was doing a regular audit, it wouldn't be nearly so bad but she doesn't do regular audits."

The difference between the two is that in a performance audit, Fraser would actually voice her opinion on spending, rather than just detailing what spending took place.

Comartin gave an example that

came out of Nova Scotia.

"They did a performance audit there and the auditor general decided that the premier of the province, a whole province, was not entitled to two laptop computers. That was a judgement call that he made."

Comartin said MPs were also uncomfortable with Fraser deciding how well they spent advertising dollars and other expenses.

"Her office has some real authority and she should not be making those judgement calls, they should be made by the electorate."

'I'm absolutely sure that when the Board of Internal Economy gets together, a sensible decision is going to be reached.'

— Liberal MP Bob Rae

But Fraser can't currently do a regular audit either, Comartin admitted, and that is why a compromise is needed.

"We want to see more information come out, but it's got to come out in a format that people are able to understand. ... We've got to be sure that the information that gets out, people can judge it."

Canadians fearful that their representatives could be indulging in the kind of errant spending that ruptured faith in Britain's Parliament needn't be worried, said Comartin.

He said egregious spending on personal items for one's home, including renovations, is not possible in Canada.

"You just get turned down. It is not within the categories that you can spend money on."

In Britain, MPs were caught expensing everything from home furnishings to getting a moat cleared.

Liberal MP Bob Rae said he is also confident an agreement will happen soon.

"I would say that if the auditor general wants to look into something, I'm sure that is something that is going to be worked out. I don't think that is going to be a problem at all."

"I'm absolutely sure that when the Board of Internal Economy gets together, a sensible decision is going to be reached."

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff has asked the auditor general to sit down and talk with the Board of Internal Economy, he said.

"The one unfortunate impression that has been left by all this is that our expenses are not audited or reviewed. They are audited and reviewed on a very regular basis, not only by government officials but also by a very respected auditing firm. So you know, this notion that somehow there is no review of what is taking place is simply not true."

B.C. city's adoption of 'living wage' just the beginning: CCPA

By **JOAN DELANEY**
Epoch Times Staff

A few weeks ago, a small city just east of Vancouver did something unprecedented in Canada—it enacted the country's first living wage bylaw.

New Westminster city council voted unanimously to pay its employees, both full- and part-time, \$16.74 per hour, and requires its contractors who work on city-owned property to do the same.

That figure is based on what it takes to keep a family of two working adults and two children above the poverty line in New Westminster.

Those working for the city will not be impacted by the new policy as their wages are already above that amount. Where it will make a difference is to the contractors, says Seth Klein, the B.C. director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).

"It's all about the contractors. That's where the rubber hits the road with the living wage. It's about janitorial contracts and food service contracts and security guard contracts—this is where so many low-income and immigrant parents work," he says.

The CCPA has been campaigning along with the Living Wage for Families Coalition for a living wage—as opposed to the minimum wage—paid by large employers in both the public and private sectors. The coalition is comprised of unions, church groups, and social agencies that advocate for the working poor.

At \$8 an hour—and a \$6-per-hour training wage—B.C. has the lowest minimum wage in Canada, one that has been frozen since 2001. Critics say this is directly linked to child poverty. For six years running, B.C. has had the highest level of child poverty in the country.

"Even a single individual at \$8 an hour is below the poverty line," says Klein. "If you have kids you're dramatically below the poverty line."

The living wage established by the CCPA for a family in Metro Vancouver—one of the most expensive



New Westminster City Council voted unanimously to pay its employees \$16.74 per hour, a figure based on what it takes to keep a family of two working adults and two children above the poverty line in New Westminster. PHOTOS.COM

cities in the country—is \$18.17 per hour. Although much more than the minimum wage, given the cost of rent and child care it is still modest, says Klein.

"We define the living wage as something more than the poverty line, but it is still a budget where it's tight making ends meet. There's no savings for retirement, there's no savings for your kid's post-secondary education, there's no interest payments on your credit cards or anything like that."

He says he hopes other cities will follow New Westminster's lead, which is what happened in the United States after Baltimore adopted that country's first living wage policy in 1994. Today there are about 140 U.S. municipalities, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., that have various kinds of living wage policies.

But the concept of a living wage has its critics, one being Niels Veldhuis, director of fiscal studies and a senior economist with the Fraser Institute. He says the experience in the U.S. has shown that the practice has a negative impact on employment.

"For every 10 percent increase in the wage rate—in the artificially set wage rate—you're losing about 2 percent of employment. So there is quite a decrease in employment both in terms of the number of hours that are worked and then secondly the number of jobs available."

Veldhuis says a living wage can also have the effect of driving up property taxes and result in cuts to services. He alleges that in the U.S., unions are largely behind the push for a living wage because, by increasing the cost for contractors, it decreases the incentive for municipalities to contract out services.

Mystery creature washes ashore in Ontario

By **JOAN DELANEY**
Epoch Times Staff

It's being called everything from a cross between an otter and a beaver, to a waterlogged muskrat, to a monster. Whatever it is, the strange-looking animal that washed ashore in a remote northern Ontario aboriginal commu-



Image of the animal that washed ashore in the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug community in northern Ontario. KITCHENUHMAJKOOSIB INNINUWUG

nity is seen by some as a bad omen.

The creature, with a furry body—but a bare, white face—a long snout, and a rat-like tail, was spotted by two nurses earlier this month floating near the shore of Big Trout Lake, some 200 kilometres south of Hudson Bay.

After their dog dragged the animal ashore, the nurses took pictures of it, which a few days later were posted on the Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug community's website.

"No one knows what it is but our ancestors used to call it the Ugly One," the website says. "It is rarely seen but when seen, especially if it is dead, it's a bad omen and something bad will happen, according to our elders and ancestors."

Band councillor Darryl Sainnawap says the last time such an animal was seen in the community of 1,200 was about 60 years ago.

"One of our local community members said when he was young he saw this creature while he was with his grandfather. His grandfather at that time told him that this creature lives in swampy areas or creeks and that it feeds on beavers. He called it omajinaakos. In our language, that would translate to 'something ugly' or 'the ugly one.'"

Other unusual creatures have been seen on Trout Lake, says Sainnawap, including mermaids and a huge water snake.

"There's been sightings of

large snakes, or a snake of some sort. Community members see it from time to time, and also I've heard of pilots seeing it while flying over the lake."

He says that in one spot the lake is very deep. According to the community's website, "There is a bottomless depth near one of the islands of Kitchenuhmaykoosib. Elders /Ancestors believed/said that this is where large snakes and mermaids come up from."

Since the photos of the dead creature were posted online, an Internet debate has been raging as to what exactly it might be.

Some suggest that it's simply a bloated, partially decomposed muskrat or sea otter, while others believe it's a nutria—a beaver-like animal imported to Louisiana from South America during the fur trade in the 1930s. One said that because the animal's fur "runs backwards, towards the face," it is not a water dweller.

Others compared it to the Montauk monster, an unidentified animal that washed ashore in Montauk, New York, in July 2008.

It may never be known now. After the nurses showed the photos to some community members and realised it was not a common local animal, they returned to where they left it only to find it had disappeared.

"It could have been seagulls, crows, or dogs might have got to it," says Sainnawap. "It could have been anything."

Farmers' union sounds alarm on first synthetic cell

UNION CONTINUED FROM P1

The scientists used a computer DNA map to create the cell, which has replicated itself over a billion times.

"This is the first self-replicating species that we have had on the planet whose parent is a computer," Venter said.

The development has sparked a debate in the scientific community on ethics and safety. Genetics scientist Vyacheslav Tarantul believes the discovery can benefit humanity.

"Craig Venter already made a large contribution having taken part in deciphering the human genome, that is, reading the DNA code, and now he is trying to write one himself," Tarantul told Voice of Russia.

"Similar controversies began in the 1970s when genetic engineering emerged. People panicked when transgenic animals appeared but nothing bad happened. Any good discovery can be abused, like nuclear energy. Venter's discovery can lead to creation of smart microorganisms. Can you imagine new bacteria capable of producing vaccines, fermenting cheese or wine, and doing it more efficiently than the current ones?"

George Church, a synthetic biologist at Harvard Medical School, is calling for increased surveillance and licensing to prevent the accidental release of synthetic life.

"Everybody in the synthetic biology ecosystem should be licensed like everybody in the aviation system is licensed," he told New Scientist magazine.

Boehm said that as "we move up the scientific ladder, the risks are rising exponentially to all species."

"We need to very carefully consider with the precautionary principle: the regulations, ethics, and moral questions raised by interfering with nature and creating new and unnatural life forms."

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