

Drastic Cuts to Service Canada, by Deb O'Connor

Remember the bad old days of Mike the Knife in Ontario? Public servants were fired by the thousands and service levels tanked. That was when the office that handled child support payments was like a black pit into which both parents' money and desperate enquiries fell, and applications for disability pensions or the Trillium drug program sat for up to a year before decisions were reached. It's taken several years to restore government functions to efficiency, helped along considerably by the introduction of Service Ontario offices spread around the Province to handle a wide range of services, from renewing a driver's licence or health card to getting a birth certificate.

But, there's a very ominous cloud on the horizon at the federal level, current workplace of former tory MPPs from the Harris days like Jim Flaherty, John Baird and Tony Clement, who learned the dark arts of destroying public services back then. Now firmly in charge federally, the conservatives have announced the closing of most of their Service Canada offices, from the current 120 down to just 22 for the entire country, all within the next 3 years. For many Canadians that means instead of going to their local office for assistance, they will have to attempt to conduct their business over the telephone or online.

This is no small change and the impact will be huge. Service Canada offices deal with a wide variety of critical, time sensitive federal services, such as unemployment insurance claims, Old Age and Canada Retirement and Disability Pensions, as well as applications for social insurance cards and other programs.

The feds. announced last August that 1,200 Service Canada jobs were being cut, half of them immediately, and by September the results coming from their own call centres were telling. People calling about their unemployment claims weren't able to reach an agent and were hanging up almost a quarter of the time. In Winnipeg and Vancouver a third of callers couldn't get through. During the last week of September a full fifty percent of seniors calling about their pensions got busy signals. Even though the purpose of the call centres is to have automated attendants handle the calls, more than half required the attention of a trained, human agent to complete them successfully. Machines can only do so much.

With unemployment on the rise and winter ahead, and more and more citizens approaching retirement, this hardly seems the right time to reduce vital services to Canadians who depend on them. Not everyone is computer literate. Many of us live in rural areas where the internet is unavailable, as hard as that may be to appreciate for anyone reading this now. Plenty of people can't even afford phones these days, never mind computers and internet fees. Now they won't have a local Services Canada office to turn to for those tools without which they can't even apply for unemployment insurance.

But we'll have all those fancy new prisons, and high-tech stealth fighter jets instead. And happy corporations, whose continuing tax cuts are paving the way to more and more profit for them while ordinary Canadians see their basic services decimated to pay for that largesse. It's going to be a long four years.