

COMMENT

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OUR VIEW / EDITORIAL

No good case for Woolwich to rush into new fire plan

WOOLWICH WILL HAVE TO tread lightly in coming up with a new fire master plan.

The document rolled out this week contains plenty of ideas for spending more money, but very little in the way of justification for it. Most notably, it suggests investing millions in new fire halls at a time when the township is dealing with failing infrastructure far more important to the public.

Most ominously, it makes mention of a so-called composite department, which would see full-time firefighters added to what is now an entirely volunteer operation. Actually that's not strictly true, as the township has seen a massive increase in operating costs in the last decade, going from one part-time chief to four full-time employees on the administrative side, with no real change to service received by the public.

A decision on some \$4.5 million for the construction of new buildings can't be made lightly, though some councillors this week seemed ready to sign off on the poorly documented request. Ultimately, a vote was deferred, and now council must demand that a better case be made before considering approval of many of the measures, particularly relocating the Elmira station to land in the new Lunor subdivision.

The arguments for such a move – getting away from the chemical plants in the industrial area and being close to a residential area where firefighters might live – appear rather simplistic. Any emergency at Chemtura, for instance, that engulfed that much of the town would mean we're facing a disaster well beyond the scope of one fire station. Likewise, relocating to the new area would see slower response times to some parts of town, perhaps those older areas more vulnerable to fire than brand new homes built to higher standards.

Of course, the majority of calls aren't actual fires. As with fire departments, paid and volunteer, across North America, the number of fires is down. Many departments, particularly in the cities, have taken to expanding the range of other calls in order to keep their numbers up, often putting them at odds with ambulance/paramedic and police services.

This is especially problematic where full-time firefighters are used, as costs have risen exorbitantly, typically beyond reason and beyond municipalities' ability to pay – a much larger problem in the U.S., for example, where the number of firefighters has grown in inverse proportion to the number of actual fire calls, down about 40 per cent over the last three decades even as there are a third more firefighters on the payroll.

The stats mirror what's happening with policing costs here, too, constantly increasing as crime figures drop.

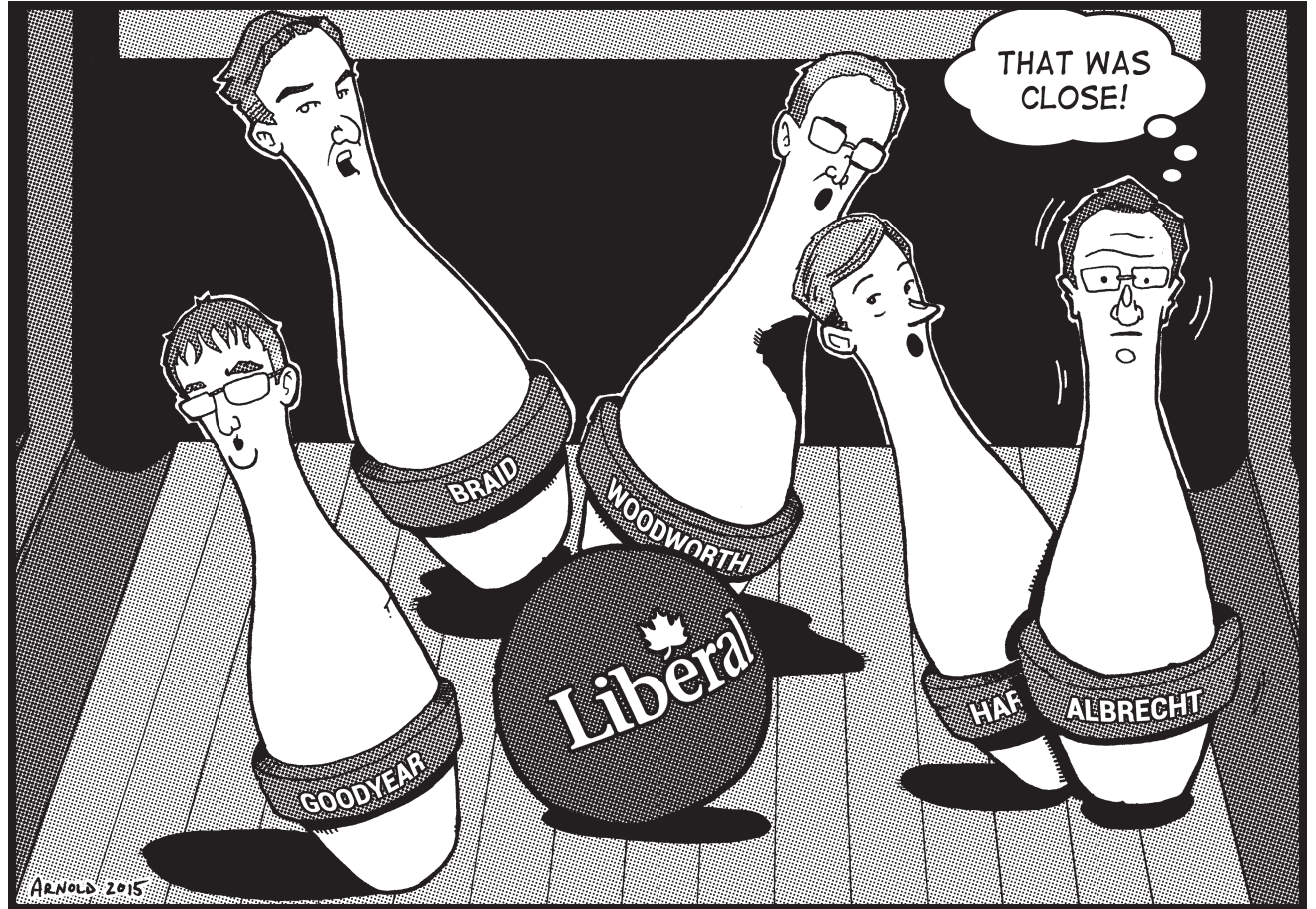
Therein lies a warning for Woolwich to avoid any notion of hiring full-time firefighters.

When it comes to wage and benefit increases, police and fire are in a class of their own ... and it is not sustainable. Much of the blame for out of control costs can be laid at the feet of the arbitration system.

Unable to strike, workers in what are deemed essential services have the right to arbitration hearings if a contract can't be negotiated with their government employer. Such settlements are typically generous, often outstripping inflation and growth, and failing to consider the ability to pay. That's how we get municipalities with shrinking revenues and stuttering economies – think Windsor, for instance – saddled with increases nonetheless.

Perniciously, there's a ratcheting effect that sees each subsequent arbitration settlement being based on the previous rulings, leading to a never-ending spiral upward regardless of value, need or productivity.

THE VIEW FROM HERE



The four other Waterloo Region ridings having gone Liberal. Kitchener-Conestoga's Harold Albrecht survives a close race to become the last one standing.

WORLD VIEW / GWYNNE DYER

Burkina Faso's eighth coup fails, with democracy in sight



THE DUST HAS SETTLED in Ouagadougou, Africa's capital of military coups (seven in 65 years), and the elections in Burkina Faso have been rescheduled for the end of next month. Don't be cynical about it; that is real progress.

Burkina Faso, a landlocked country in West Africa, competes with Somalia for the honour of being Africa's poorest country. You might wonder why anybody would want the thankless job of running such a place, but political power means access to scarce resources (like money) even in the poorest countries. Especially if you are in the army.

What would have been the country's eighth coup (if it had succeeded) began in mid-September when General Gilbert Diendere, the head of the Presidential Guard, seized and imprisoned the interim president and prime minister. He was doing it, he said, because the party of the last presi-

dent, Blaise Compaore, had been banned from running in the election.

Compaore, a former soldier who first came to power in a coup himself, was ousted by popular demonstrations last year when he tried to run for the presidency yet again after 27 years in power. Diendere had been his closest associate for all of that time, and everybody assumed that his coup was really a bid by Compaore to return to power.

Everybody was right, although if the coup succeeded Diendere might have decided to stay in power himself. When the demonstrators who had forced Compaore out of power last year came out on the streets again, Diendere's troops hosed them down with automatic weapons fire, killing 14 and wounding hundreds. It was not the mob but the institutions that thwarted his ambitions.

The coup was instantly condemned by the African Union. "The AU considers the announcement by the military of the 'dismissal' of (interim) President Michel Kafando and the at-

tempt of substituting him with 'new authorities' as null and void," said the AU chairperson, South Africa's Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma.

The regional organization, the Economic Community for West African States (Ecowas), took a softer line, putting together a mediation team and offering the coup leaders amnesty despite the killings. But when civil society groups in Burkina Faso protested at the amnesty offer, the Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, took the lead for West Africa.

Buhari, who was a military dictator 30 years ago, coming to power in one coup and losing it in another, now describes himself as a "converted democrat." He called Diendere's coup a "brazen contravention" of Burkina Faso's constitution and demanded that he withdraw. And Burkina Faso's army, which had always resented the special privileges of the Presidential Guard, moved into the capital and told Diendere to surrender.

So he did, although there was a bit of shooting first. Now Diendere is under

arrest facing 11 charges including "crimes against humanity," the Presidential Guard has been disarmed and formally disbanded, and the election is back on again for Nov. 29.

The election will not solve all of Burkina Faso's problems, but democracy might do it eventually. The country still has the lowest literacy rate in the world, it is still dirt poor, and the population (now 17 million) is still doubling every 25 years. But one thing is definitely changed for the better.

Most Burkinabes may be illiterate, but they have become aware of their rights and no longer accept the dictates of armed thugs in uniform without question. African institutions have changed too, and no longer turn a blind eye when a member country faces a military coup. They intervene promptly and decisively, and they generally succeed.

They are less good at dealing with countries where dictators hold regular elections whose outcomes they control through