

Why Are We Paying Parking Cops \$100,000 a Year?

By: Marni Soupcoff – April 2, 2013

So, before we get talking about the release of Ontario's latest "sunshine list" of public sector salaries, let's review a few statistics. In 2012, the average Canadian salary was \$47,200. This number was a bit higher in Ontario, but not a lot higher: The average salary there was \$47,788. And in the field of healthcare and social assistance -- a field that is well-represented on the sunshine list -- the average annual take was \$43,420. It doesn't take much mathematical prowess to figure out that these averages are all less than half of \$100,000 -- the threshold salary for being named on the most populous province's sunshine list. Which is worth remembering.

I'm not opposed to public sector employees making as much as private sector employees. If taxpayers are going to pay someone to do a job, we're best off paying them competitively so that we attract good talent.

But the thing is, I look at the sunshine list and worry that we're not just paying public sector employees competitively -- we're paying them eye-popping salaries that no private sector employer would dream of offering for comparable positions.

I had this thought when I saw several parking enforcement officers bringing in over \$100k a year. No specialized education or experience is required for the job. It is a position that, in the words of a government job posting, requires the employee to be "responsible for ensuring that illegally parked vehicles are dealt with in an appropriate manner." Which is not exactly rocket science. So why the jumbo paycheques?

Now, in the private sector, Canadian security guards were making an average of \$31,029 a year in 2005, the last year for which I was able to find data. It's probable (though not inevitable) that that number has risen slightly over the years due to inflation. Oh, and what the heck -- let's give the parking guys the benefit of the doubt and say that they have greater responsibilities than the average private security guard since they're actually getting people's cars towed -- and facing the wrath of irritated drivers who were **JUST STOPPING FOR HALF A SECOND TO PICK UP ONE TINY LITTLE THING**. But it's still a huge leap to get over \$100,000 a year for a job that is, in essence, open to anyone with a clean record and a driver's license.

If there are supposed to be strict austerity measures in place because the province is going broke, why are we overpaying for ticket-givers? I could ask the same question about the city of Toronto assistant administrator; industrial millwright; manager of horticulture and greenhouses; and -- let's face it -- every single Toronto city councillor, who are all also on Ontario's \$100,000+ public sector earners list. That sounds like more than the province staying competitive as an employer. That sounds like

abusing the taxpayer's forced largesse and funding exceptionally and unnecessarily well-compensated jobs.

So, do I have it in for public sector workers? Not a bit. Many of my friends work in the public sector and they are smart, hard-working people who do their jobs well. There's nothing sinister about an employee taking a government job that will offer significantly better pay and benefits than the private alternative. It's sensible and predictable.

My problem is with the government not having the guts to rein in this excessive spending on salaries. This will ultimately hurt not only the private sector workers who are doing the same work for less while paying the heftier salaries of their public sector peers, but also the entire province's economy. Which is to say everyone. As the Cato Institute's Daniel J. Mitchell blogged last year, more and more mainstream organizations and institutions (including the European Central Bank and the World Bank) are coming to the conclusion that large public sectors reduce economic growth.

This is not an easy problem to tackle. It entails politicians standing up to public sector unions. Political hari kari, anyone? Care to have your cartoon face plastered on angry picketers' signs?

But someone's got to do it if Ontario's \$12-billion deficit is to be dealt with. And soon. Do we need the legislated mandatory wage freeze that Ontario Progressive Conservative finance critic Peter Shurman is calling for? My feeling is that a targeted approach would be preferable since there are surely some public sector workers that legitimately warrant wage increases and some that warrant actual cuts, which could amount to the same savings. But you know what? I'd take a wage freeze over the status quo. A freeze is a clumsy and inefficient way to gain control over salary spending. It doesn't offer helpful incentives. It's a typical government solution, but if the alternative is to keep significantly overpaying public sector employees, wouldn't it be the lesser of two evils? So that's what it seems to have come to. The government has proven itself incapable of making the thousands of smart, difficult individual decisions and showing the restraint that would forestall the need for this kind of blanket "solution."

I don't think there's a problem with some Canadians making significantly more money than others if there is genuine demand for their particular expertise or talents. So when Ontario NDP leader Andrea Horvath complains that some public sector CEOs are getting raises larger than what the average single-parent family will earn in a year, I'm not automatically outraged. Could that be an accurate reflection of some of these CEOs' market worth? Yes. However, given what the government is paying for positions that we know are far less generously compensated in the private sector, should we be skeptical about how many of these massive raises are warranted? Yes to that question too. To focus on any one person on the sunshine list is perhaps nitpicking. To begrudge a horticulturist a (very) good living could be considered unfair. Maybe even petty.

To look at the totality of the sunshine list, though, and conclude that Ontario public sector salary spending is out of control -- well, that's just common sense. This trick is to get those making the individual provincial and municipal spending decisions to take this panoramic view too.