Some things should not be for sale

The case for nonprofit and public stewardship of community infrastructure

ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

Privatization threatens Ontario

Not for Sale was first published by Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN) in 2018 to warn Ontarians about the dangers of privatizing government financed and funded services and infrastructure. The paper describes how governments were turning to the private sector to build public infrastructure even though it cost the government much more in the long run. As Auditor Generals in multiple jurisdictions have repeatedly pointed out, it never makes financial sense and syphons tax dollars into private sector profit.

By 2018 it was already evident from countries like the United Kingdom and Australia that for-profit service provision, and ownership of community infrastructure fell short on service quality and commitment to communities. The focus of private companies was, and still is, profit for shareholders. Additionally, ONN warned how, once community infrastructure is in private sector hands, it is virtually impossible to bring it back into government or nonprofit ownership.

Short-term thinking and perceived efficiency of for-profits has proved to be the stronger motivator. When the private sector builds infrastructure it keeps the debt off government books. The cost is still there, but hidden. Unfortunately, financing infrastructure in this way gives the asset to the for-profit investors placing community infrastructure at risk. Service delivery suffers, community well-being deteriorates, and it is hard to hold anyone accountable.

The relationship between government and private business has continued to deepen over the years. The Greenbelt scandal and the uproar about patronage in Skills Development funding are only the most visible of the links between government and big business in this age of late stage capitalism. Successive governments increasingly show a deep preference for private sector delivery of services notwithstanding consistent evidence that nonprofit organizations build and deliver community services for less, with better quality, and are more committed to the local people and communities they serve.

The privatization of public assets accelerates

Since 2018, involvement of the private sector in the building of infrastructure and delivery of services in Ontario has grown steadily and substantially. We did not heed the lessons from the United Kingdom and Australia, and in 2025 when the United States (U.S.) threatened Canada, the subsequent crisis provided cover for rapid acceleration of privatization. The inescapable conclusion is that in 2026, pretty much everything is for sale in Ontario.

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1 ONN defines for-profit actors as multinational, big box chains, publicly traded companies, and/or private equity firms.

2 The current stage of capitalism is characterized by globalization, dominance of multinational corporations, broad commodification and consumerism, and extreme wealth inequality. This academic article describes the impact of late-stage capitalism on Canada's public policy landscape while this article reviews the description of late-stage capitalism over decades.

As governments have focused on privatizing and/or commodifying government services, the result has been chronic and longstanding underinvestment in community infrastructure. Schools and hospitals are in disrepair and understaffed, there is an acute shortage of care settings and services for our aging population, affordable housing is woefully lacking, and encampments highlight the need for more support for people experiencing homelessness, people with mental health challenges, and people who use drugs. Universities and colleges are closing programs and cutting back enrollment. Hospitals are closing or warning of the need to cut back emergency services for lack of funds. Indeed it feels as if community assets, if not totally gone, are too few and do not meet the moment.

There are serious consequences to underfunding nonprofit community assets. Nonprofit organizations such as hospitals, nursing homes, subsidized housing, childcare centres, homes and services for people with disabilities, colleges and universities, religious facilities, recreation centres and parks, sport facilities, arts and cultural centers, social clubs and friendship centres, form the backbone of communities. When times are tough, such as during the pandemic, it was nonprofit organizations who pivoted and rallied in communities. They made sure people in need got the food and support they required, mobilized volunteers, and worked with government to ensure community members were housed and fed, while supporting essential workers, many of whom were nonprofit workers themselves.

For-profit actors, on the other hand, were found waiting, reluctant to go the extra mile and pivot in a crisis despite the needs of those who were in their care. For-profit nursing homes provided inferior care during the pandemic, and in some instances abandoned their responsibilities altogether.

Unfortunately, money talks. The world, including Canada, has seen exponential growth in capital accumulation and growing inequality between the owners of wealth and those that provide the labour. In the private sector, those with wealth have identified government functions as an expansion market to generate additional wealth. With the approval and encouragement of the Ontario government, the private sector has put up the capital to build and operate services like surgical clinics, drug treatment centers, and nursing homes. Government also divested responsibility for the provision of employment and training services primarily to private for-profit system managers. These system managers have assumed the role of prescribing services and funding service providers across the province with serious impacts on the quality of services and exclusion of many Ontarians in need of assistance. Additionally, the province is currently actively advocating to the federal government for an increase in the number of for-profit childcare services. Many autism and developmental services are being moved to a consumer purchase model of service delivery, opening the door to commodification and for-profit providers. As a result, services and wages will deteriorate as tax dollars go to fund returns on private investment.

3 ONN's Explainer on privatization: An overview of privatization policy efforts provides further details on what privatization is and the conditions it grows in.

Recent examples of the deregulation include:

- Protect Ontario by Unleashing our Economy Act, 2025 erodes environmental protections for species at risk, eliminates protection for heritage buildings and archaeological sites, weakens environmental protections, and creates the Special Economic Zones Act, 2025 where any and all regulation and legislation can be waived. The Toronto island airport is designated as a special economic zone to justify takeover despite local concerns.
- Safer Municipalities Act, 2025 provides municipalities powers to clear encampments of people experiencing homelessness without requiring they be housed. This has sanctioned the blaming of the unhoused for their lack of permanent housing when advocates continue to highlight this as a systemic, not personal, problem.
- Fighting Delays, Building Faster Act, 2025 turns water into a commodity by allowing the province to create private water companies that critics say opens the door to private profit for our natural resources. It cuts local municipal governments out of decision-making regarding water. With thirsty artificial intelligence (AI) data processing centers circling, this opens the door for the sale of our water for private profit.
- Building a More Competitive Economy Act, 2025 weakens the authority of source water controls, and sets general standards, not site specific standards for Ontario forest tracts and abolishes the need for annual harvesting permits.

Recent examples of the deregulation include (cont'd) :

- Provincial Parks and Conservation Reserves Amendment Act, 2025 includes an amendment that allows the government to classify and create categories of provincial parks, including urban and adventure parks. The government argues it is meant to apply only to the Wasaga Beach front which is being given to the Town of Wasaga for development over the objections of 98 per cent of those who commented during the consultation period. Environmentalists, however, say the legislative change is not specific and can apply to any provincial park making them all at risk of commercial development.

When these and other legislative amendments are considered, alongside announcements of new private clinics in the medical sector, the takeover of more and more Boards of Education as the Minister reduces the role of local school trustees and imposes centralized decisionmaking, and the provincial appointment of regional chairs rather than through municipal elections, the people of Ontario are starting to take notice.

The common themes emerging amidst the flurry of legislative and regulatory changes and announcements is clear: less accountability and transparency of both businesses and government and more ability to override local concerns, interests, and objections. The sum of all this legislation sets the stage for a massive giveaway of the collective assets of Ontarians. Almost everything in Ontario is for sale.

Can the tide turn?

Recent legislative changes and government actions appear to make Ontario public assets open for big business - our forests, our farmland, our waters, our parks, our care services, our medical services - everything, it seems, is up for sale.

Ontarians do not believe that everything should be for sale or subject to profit. How can we as a province collectively determine how to steward Ontarians' collective wealth including our natural resources? How can we build strong communities where everyone participates and everyone belongs? How can ordinary Ontarians benefit from economic activity as we build a strong economy independent of the U.S.? How can we address growing wealth inequality and ensure everyone has an opportunity to thrive?

The recent actions and activities in the U.S. have helped Canadians clarify Canadian values yet the recent deluge of legislative changes, centralization of decision-making, and deregulation efforts in Ontario feels more like mimicking the U.S. than authentically Canadian.

An alternative approach to selling out to big business is possible. We have nonprofit and cooperative structures, strong public schools, nonprofit universities, colleges and hospitals, and an educated and skilled workforce. Ontario has a long and successful tradition of using a mix of government, nonprofit, and cooperative corporate structures to provide community services and safeguard community infrastructure.

We have capital in pension plans and banks that could finance a retooling of Canadian communities and address inequality.

We have the collective ability to do things differently if we choose. However, we will have to disrupt the symbiotic relationship between big business and government, and make our collective wealth work for us.

About ONN

ONN is the independent nonprofit network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy, and services to strengthen the sector as a key pillar of our society and economy. We work to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to government, funders and other stakeholders.

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