

Premier ponders blowing up our CAS mess: Cohn

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Justin Tang / THE CANADIAN PRESS

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne has proclaimed herself ready to do whatever it takes to fix the children's aid societies mess, Martin Regg Cohn writes.

By: [Martin Regg Cohn](#) Provincial Politics, Published on Tue Dec 22 2015

Ontario's CAS mess is a throwback to Dickensian times.

The fundamental flaw is organizational sprawl. The province bankrolls a patchwork of 47 separate children's aid societies, divided along regional and religious lines that are a legacy of history, not humanity.

Our children languish in well-meaning but poorly performing silos. In today's Ontario, why do we still have privately run children's aid societies divided along sectarian lines, with different lineups for Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and everyone else?

The latest [report from Ontario's auditor general](#), and a year's worth of [stories from the Toronto Star](#), have exposed a pattern of neglect by the very children's aid societies that are supposed to guard against parental neglect.

Lacking government accountability, they are bogged down in bureaucracy. The entire system should be blown up and rebuilt from the ground up.

Now Premier Kathleen Wynne says she's open to the idea. In a year-end interview, Wynne proclaimed herself ready to do whatever it takes to fix the mess — including "blowing up" the existing system if necessary:

“If we could fix what is ailing the child protection system, child welfare system in this province, by starting from scratch and blowing up what exists — I would be willing to do that, because one child’s life would be worth changing the administrative structures,” Wynne told me.

Just not yet. The premier wants more evidence before she acts.

Yet it’s hard to fathom a system that is more discredited and dysfunctional. Conceived in the industrial age, today’s CAS system seems oblivious to the digital era. Without a secure foundation, the entire architecture of children’s aid is crumbling.

Its computer system is dated and dilapidated. Too often, CAS workers fail to communicate with one another, confer with a child’s teacher, or check records of parental abuse.

What seemed [progressive in the late 1800s](#) is simply regressive today. Children’s aid needs to be rescued from itself.

Wynne knows from personal experience that the system is broken. Before becoming premier, she saw up close how teachers and child protection workers failed to connect — and children fell through the cracks.

“As the minister of education, I was completely distraught at the lack of communication between school boards and children’s aid societies in some parts of the province,” Wynne said. “It is ridiculous that there wouldn’t be just an assumption that children’s aid societies and school boards would work very closely together, because teachers see issues that children’s aid societies need to know about and vice-versa.”

[Adoption is another issue](#) that cries out for reform. Before he became Canada’s governor general, David Johnston led a 2009 report for the Ontario government calling for a central adoption clearinghouse, rescuing orphans and crown wards from the labyrinth of local CAS listings that leave prospective parents out of the loop if they reside in the wrong region or aren’t the right religion.

Wynne says she has tasked her minister of children and youth services, Tracy MacCharles, to come up with solutions.

“I think there are some pieces that need to be centralized, that we need more oversight of,” Wynne said in our interview. “Do we carve out a piece like adoption, for example, and have it delivered differently, have one provincial agency?”

Good question. No answer yet.

“Those are the kinds of questions that the minister is grappling with now and she’s going to bring us recommendations. Because absolutely, there has to be change, there has to be more coordination.”

The auditor general's report catalogued failures by CAS workers to meet a seven-day deadline to start investigating child abuse cases. It takes seven months, on average, to conclude such probes — far beyond the 30-day limit. In half the cases reviewed, CAS workers neglected to make “crucial” checks of the child abuse register, creating “serious risk.”

It's a \$1.5-billion system that not only fails to deliver value for money, but fails to value a child's life.

Contrast that inertia with the government's belated efforts to break up its [broken home care system](#) this month: Two decades ago, Ontario had 43 separate Community Care Access Centres operating at arm's length from government. Unwieldy and unresponsive, they were consolidated into 14 CCACs a decade ago. Now, the Liberals are abolishing them entirely to take control of home care through regional health networks directly accountable to government.

Why is Ontario ready to reform a two-decade-old home care model for seniors, while maintaining an 18th-century model for child protection? Wynne answers the question with another question:

“That’s the co-ordination question and the centralization question. What needs to be centralized? Where do we need to move away from that fragmentation?”

From the governor general to the auditor general, the message to the premier is clear: We need answers.

Unlike the grown-ups who get all the attention, kids can't vote, and lack a voice. But they still need politicians in power to hear them.

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