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Bill 198 saga turns bizarre as Ecker pushes for changes that “will never be proclaimed”

Does this seem weird to you?

Ontario Finance Minister Janet Ecker continues to push the Legislature to pass changes to Ontario pension laws even though she says – in writing – that they will *never* be proclaimed into law.

The changes to the *Pension Benefits Act* are part of the giant Bill 198. If enacted, they would make it easier for some employers to grab pension surpluses that, under current law, rightfully belong to pension plan members (Bill 198 would not affect pension plans that spell out that employees own any surplus or some part of it, e.g., the OPSEU Pension Trust, the CAAT Pension Plan, or the Canadian Blood Services pension plan).

Ecker made her statement in a news release Thursday after a raucous demonstration in the Legislature Wednesday showed angry pensioners would be ballot-box poison for the Tories.

In the release, Ecker said, “We are committed to further consultation on the matters which were to have been dealt with in this Bill. Only after such consultations occur, and only if it is necessary to make legislative amendments, will any changes be introduced in a new bill which will be fully debated in the House.”

In other words, *We are not going to make these changes, but if we do, here is how we will make them.*

In the Legislature yesterday, Liberal MPP George Smitherman and New Democrat Gilles Bisson asked Ecker repeatedly why the government would not cut the pension changes out of Bill 198. Ecker wouldn't give a straight answer. Government house leader Chris Stockwell went so far as to say

that Ecker's news release was “an opinion.”

Ecker said the government will work with “stakeholders” to create an “expert committee” to examine how Ontario should address these issues.

She made no mention of who might qualify as a stakeholder, nor who the “experts” would be. But if Bill 198 is any indication, the experts could well be employer representatives, many of whom are experts on employee pensions the way foxes are experts on chickens.

The Tories' bizarre “we are but we aren't” approach to pension changes is causing uncertainty for pension funds and pension managers, just as their first partial retreat on hydro-electricity deregulation caused uncertainty for the electricity industry, said OPSEU president Leah Casselman.

“If the Tories are not going to change the Pension Benefits Act, they should not change it,” she said. “If they are, they should come out and say so. Right now, nobody can tell what they're doing.”

There are two possible reasons why the Tories will not kill the pension changes outright, she said: “either Cabinet plans to proclaim them, or they don't want their corporate backers to think they're backing down. Either way, it still looks like employers, not pensioners, are calling the shots.”

The Ontario Federation of Labour will go ahead next week with a planned meeting of pensioners and other stakeholders interested in keeping pension dollars in pensions, not profits.

Contact Janet Ecker for a straight answer by phone at (416) 325-0400, by fax at (416) 325-0374, or by e-mail at: janet_ecker@ontla.ola.org.