

Dealing with multiplication and maximum wage

By Nate Smelle

For the last few months it has grown more difficult to find a social gathering space in North Hastings, and throughout the province, where there is not a heated discussion underway about Ontario's new minimum wage. Recently, I found myself drawn into one of these conversations, while enjoying a cup of Joe at The Partista Espresso Bar in Bancroft. I overheard a few folks at the table beside me talking about how raising the minimum pay rate from \$11.60 an hour to \$14 would hurt local businesses.

'I think it's a great idea to pay people a living wage, but it is going to cause a lot of small businesses to let people go or shut their doors,' said the one man.

'Most of the businesses in this town can't afford it,' said the woman across from him.

Visibly disturbed by her friends' comments, the other woman at the table chimed in, 'That may be true for some small businesses that are already struggling, but there are way more businesses throughout the province who can afford to pay their workers a fair wage.'

Unable to resist the temptation of engaging in a spontaneous discussion about income inequality, I threw my two cents on the table. I mentioned how Canada's 100 highest paid CEOs had each already earned the average annual salary of one of their employees (\$49,760) by 11 a.m. on the first work day of 2018.

Not having known who these three people were prior to sitting down with them, I explained how through my work as a reporter in the area I had the opportunity to speak with several individuals working for minimum wage in our community who are struggling to feed their families and pay their rent, heat, hydro and water bills.

'Everybody I have talked to about this told me that they believed an hour of their time was just as valuable as an hour of their boss's time,' I said.

As the conversation continued, it occurred to me how foolish it is for people to blame the poor for needing a little bit more to get by. 'But won't paying workers a fair living wage cost people their jobs and stifle economic growth?' asked the man, now playing the devil's advocate.

'What they seem to be forgetting though, is that when people make more money they also spend more,' I responded. 'When the cost of living - water and wastewater bills, food, shelter, heat and hydro - goes up why shouldn't the wages follow suit?'

By the time we had finished our coffee, the solution we had arrived at ultimately boiled down to an equitable redistribution of the wealth, so that everyone in the community and across the country would be able afford the basic necessities of life.

Thanking my new friends for the opportunity to jump into their healthy debate, I headed for home. Putting the key in the ignition I sat there for a moment as the car warmed up, listening to Eddy Grant's '80s classic, *Electric Avenue* on the radio. As the song neared its end I noticed how the lyrics seemed to sum up my thoughts on this matter perfectly.

'Who is to blame in one country; Never can get to the one; Dealing in multiplication; And they still can't feed everyone, oh no!'