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Jim Coyle

Let's face it. If we were Premier Dalton McGuinty, we'd want to get rid of Ombudsman André Marin and Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller, too.

In recent years, their good work has made for some of the Ontario government's more embarrassing days.

In fact, if everyone in government did their job as enthusiastically and fearlessly as the two administrative watchdogs, well, we probably wouldn't need an André Marin or Gord Miller.

Alas, we live in an imperfect world populated by charmingly imperfect beings. Governments, their agencies and employees occasionally act unfairly or produce unintended harm.

Just ask the grandparents doing heroic work raising grandchildren – and saving the system bundles of money in the process – who needed a recent tribunal ruling to get reinstated the modest benefits the province had cut.

Almost by definition, governments erect bureaucratic barriers or labyrinthine mazes, which average citizens lack the resources and wherewithal to navigate over or through.

Enter folks like Marin.

When he was appointed ombudsman in 2004, he promised to put "the office on the map." And, to the premier's considerable dismay, most especially with his examination into some broad systemic problems, he certainly did.

He delivered a series of scathing reports made to measure – with his brash personality and playful and effective use of language – for maximum media consumption.

Not only that, Marin wanted to do more, especially during lean times when efficiency presumably matters most.

"Our jurisdiction is limited," he wrote in a recent annual report. "We do not have the authority to root out bureaucratic inefficiency, indolence and bad judgment in some of the areas that matter most to Ontarians – and for which they pay the most.

"We are excluded from overseeing what we call the MUSH sector: municipalities, universities, schools and hospitals and long-term care facilities, as well as children's aid societies and policies.

"These are areas where thrift, sensible government and good judgment are acutely required, yet the government of Ontario declines our help."

Now, it would appear McGuinty wishes to decline his services – and Miller's – entirely.

The five-year contracts of the pair expire in a few weeks. The province has said they will not be automatically reappointed, and that the posts will be opened to competition.

Fair enough. But the premier went further. He suggested their reappointments are unlikely.



Ombudsman André Marin, left, has received splashy media coverage for his reports, while Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller's latest report chastised the government over curbing greenhouse gases.

ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO (left), TYLER BROWNBRIDGE/GUELPH MERCURY FILE PHOTO

"At some point in time, you've got to make a change."

Which raised fair questions about his motives.

The premier sits atop an operation that spends more than \$100 billion a year in public money. Under the parliamentary system, extraordinary power is reposed in very few hands. Even so, scrutiny steadily diminishes.

McGuinty's change to a morning question period and reordering of the legislative day has, by most assessments, reduced accountability.

The legislative press gallery, as the transformation of the media business continues, shrinks apace.

Just recently, McGuinty's office even changed the way in which it announces his schedule. Previously, it provided a week's notice. Now, it announces his engagements day by day – making it ever more difficult for news agencies strapped for staff and cash to cover him.

There was no reason for this (though some bogus argument about security could probably be trumped up), other than increased control for the premier's office.

That's what the offices of first ministers – and any ministry of government – typically do. They act in their own perpetuation and advantage.

That's why folks like Marin and Miller are so valuable.

"There are a lot of Ontarians who are interested in those jobs," the premier said.

True.

But it's hard to imagine many who will be more committed to the work.

Jim Coyle's provincial affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.