

# EDITORIALS

**TORONTO STAR**

John D. Cruickshank *Publisher*

Michael Cooke *Editor*

## AIR AMBULANCE SERVICE

# New day at ORNGE

A provincial bureaucrat has replaced the staggeringly high-paid CEO at Ontario's air ambulance service, top executives have been fired and the entire board has agreed to resign. This dramatic housecleaning comes in the wake of stories by the *Star's* Kevin Donovan that showed ORNGE executives were hiding their salaries from the public and apparently using taxpayer funds to pursue private sector opportunities with no evident public benefit.

Lopping off heads is a staple in any government's toolbox of fixes. It's easy enough to do and was certainly warranted here. Now it's time to tackle the bigger challenges. The new CEO and board must create an agency that is publicly accountable for the \$150 million of taxpayer money it receives and sort through the warren of for-profit ventures to determine whether any have actual value to the public.

"It became abundantly clear there were issues at ORNGE that required new leadership," Health Minister Deb Matthews said Wednesday. Why did it take so long for her to see that?

As early as November 2010 health officials had lost the thread of what was going on at ORNGE. In a committee hearing they could not answer basic questions by then New Democrat MPP Howard Hampton. "We'll look into the questions," Matthews said. So, why weren't the problems discovered then?

If one warning wasn't enough, a second came in April 2011 courtesy of Progressive Conservative MPP Frank Klees. He was even more direct in the Legislature about his concerns with the air ambulance service. "How many health care dollars transferred to ORNGE are being used to subsidize parts of this business that are for-profit?" he asked. "Can (the premier) tell me that?"

Clearly, the government didn't know. Indeed, they still don't know and have ordered a forensic audit to find out. Ultimately, it took Donovan's digging and front-page stories to get the government's focused attention and action.

Going forward, the minister must be far more willing to listen to warnings — wherever they come from, including the opposition benches. At the same time, the government should not opt for the easy road, either, and batten down the hatches at every public agency to the point that no innovative thought can ever take place.

The problem with ORNGE wasn't so much that its executives were thinking of ways they could turn a profit. It's that they forgot who they should be doing it for: taxpayers.



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