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PROVINCIAL POLITICS

Auditor general says Tories vastly overstated the cost of irregular border crossers seeking asylum in Ontario

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Ontario's fiscal watchdog says Premier Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government vastly overstated the cost to the province of asylum seekers crossing the border into Canada from the U.S.

Advocates for refugees hailed the findings by the province's auditor general, calling the misinformation by elected officials another example of how politicians demonize refugees.

"In Canada and around the world, refugees are regularly dehumanized by political leaders who present misleading or even false information about them," said Janet Dench of the Canadian Council for Refugees. "This is often done deliberately in order to whip up xenophobia and racism."

In a 28-page report to the legislature released Wednesday, Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk said the \$200 million estimate by the then-minister of children, community and social services Lisa MacLeod was more than double the actual tab.

"Based on our work, \$80.7 million would have been a more reasonable estimate," Lysyk wrote.

"Most of the \$200 million of costs were for providing services to not just irregular border crossers but to all refugee claimants, including those who entered Canada at an official point of entry," she added.

Current Minister of Children, Community and Social Services Todd Smith, who succeeded MacLeod in a cabinet shuffle 13 months ago, said Lysyk's report proves Ontario is still owed money by Ottawa.

"The report confirms that the provincial government and our major municipalities have incurred tens of millions of dollars of costs which were not reimbursed by the federal government," Smith's office said in a statement.

"In line with the steps we have taken to date, the auditor general also recommended that our government seek an agreement with the federal government to ensure Ontario is fairly compensated for the costs of services it provides to refugee claimants, including irregular border crossers," the office said.

Dench said refugee claimants in Canada, like others, pay taxes, but are not eligible for many of the government services those taxes pay for. Any full accounting of the costs of refugees, she said, needs to factor in what they contribute.

"The pandemic has highlighted for us that, far from being a burden to our society, many refugee claimants are essential workers on the COVID-19 front lines to keep us fed, cared for, and safe," said Dench. "We have found that we need them and their contributions."

Smith said he has spoken to federal Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino about the issue.

In 2018, the provincial Tories were in a heated war of words with the federal Liberal government over the costs associated with helping irregular border crossers.

“Since day one we have challenged the federal government to pay us \$200 million in compensation,” MacLeod said at the time.

“We have indicated to the federal government that 40 per cent of Toronto’s shelter capacity is being used by refugees and it has put a strain financially but also in their shelter capacity ... They actually suggested that we were lying about the shelter costs in Toronto.”

Maureen Silcoff of the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers said MacLeod’s comments, deliberate or not, fuelled anti-refugee sentiments.

“The Ontario government painted a grossly inaccurate financial picture about the cost of services for people seeking Canada’s refugee protection between ports of entry, and then used those incorrect figures to promote a false story that there’s a crisis at the border,” Silcoff told the Star.

“People who need Canada’s protection, for example, those fleeing domestic violence or harm based on their sexual orientation, deserve much better.”

Lysyk said “the accuracy of information provided by the ministry to the minister for the public announcement was far off the mark.”

“Senior government officials need to ensure the accuracy of the information provided to government for public announcements and decision-making,” she added.

Of the \$80.7 million incurred, Ottawa has only provided \$15.6 million to the cities of Toronto and Ottawa and Peel region.

“In comparison, Quebec incurred \$300 million in costs and has been compensated \$286 million by the federal government through a separate cost-sharing agreement,” the auditor noted.

Asked about the cost overestimate, Liberal MPP John Fraser (Ottawa South) said “it’s a pathology with this government to exaggerate.”

“They exaggerate everything, they exaggerated the size of deficit — the FAO, the auditor general, the public accounts — said that. Now, they’re exaggerating some numbers related to irregular border crossings, so it’s not a surprise,” said Fraser.

Green Leader Mike Schreiner accused the Tories of “playing politics with immigration.”

“The government inflated this number ... to question immigration policy in this country. And I think it’s wrong,” he said.



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