

Islanders don't have a spit to stand on

There are lovely spots on Toronto Island. You can rest there, survey the skyline of 2.4 million people, and ponder why this placid harbour necklace is the setting for one of Toronto's greatest boondoggles.

It's not as if the rest of us weren't paying attention when the privileged 700 picked our pockets by getting Queen's Park to let them live in one of our nicest parks.

If Morley Kells, Tory MPP for Etobicoke-Lakeshore, can pull it off and finally get these pushy folks to pay their share, we should raise a statue to him. Because so many have failed, including Paul Godfrey, once the most powerful local politician, even when every court up to Ottawa's Supremes ruled against the islanders.

The islanders never won a legal battle or a Metro council vote. The courts ruled they didn't even own their houses. Yet for one dumb reason or another, the bulldozers were always diverted. The decision of Bob Rae's NDP government in 1993 to grant salvation – the terms of the sweetheart deal seemingly dictated by islanders – was another low point.

Now the islanders are saying Kells has no support to make the deal, forgetting that almost all the 32 Liberal and Tory MPPs who voted against them in 1993 are still around, like Premier Ernie Eves, and some, like Chris Stockwell, who are fiery foes.

A taste of geography is in order as I side with Kells and his reform plan, one point of which would make islanders pay taxes based on market value, just like the rest of us. Golly, what a radical concept!

It's always been called Toronto Island even though there are a number of islands – actually a spit created by dirt drifting from the Scarborough bluffs. The Eastern Gap was smashed through by an 1850s storm because the peninsula



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was so low. More than half the island is man-made, built from dredging 80 years ago. (Which meant a native land claim was just laughed off.) The land was so vulnerable, I wondered at conservation authority meetings in the

1970s why any buildings were still there when the authority blocked structures on floodplain land in valleys like the Humber. Officials admitted their hands were tied.

Ironically, Toronto council gave the island to the regional government when Metro was formed in 1953 because it didn't have the money to develop a park. If Metro didn't

turn it all into a park, it had to give it back. Then the same council fought everything Metro did. Islanders have clout because their ranks have included city and provincial planners and bureaucrats, profs, former councillors like Liz Eayrs, and more than their share of bigfoot journalists.

Let me give one example from the 1970s, when the islanders grandstanded about how they were people without resources being bullied by fatcats. The leader of their residents association, Peter Atkinson, was a lawyer with Aird Berlis (lawyers at the firm have included the former lieutenant-governor, John Black Aird, and Coun. David Miller). The Atkinsons lived on the island and

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rented out their lovely mainland home above Grenadier Pond, where their neighbours included Derwyn Shea (councillor, MPP) and Art Eggleton, (councillor, mayor, MP).

Downtown politicians like David Crombie and John Sewell confessed to me that they wanted to save long-time, year-round islanders, but they didn't much like the rest, many of whom also had mainland homes. Trouble is, it was all or nothing: the few who were true islanders and treasured the experience, and the rest who knew bargains in homes or cottages and were willing to withhold taxes and rent and scream until we were blue in the face.

I have noticed over the decades how there are always new faces manning the barricades, people who moved in long after the fighting began.

The NDP wiped out past debts and gave Algonquin Islanders 99-year leases for \$46,000 and the same for those on Ward's for \$36,000. In other words, 262 lots, land always in public ownership, were given away for a pittance.

It gets worse. Kells has discovered, 10 years later, that thanks to inflation and equity clauses built into the complex deal, the islanders are, according to Kells, living there practically for free.

Even the province got taken. The NDP greased the deal into being by trading 23 acres worth \$38 million on Lake Shore Rd., the old psychiatric hospital, to Metro for the controversial lots. Kells says forcing islanders to pay a realistic price for their lots is one way to recover some of that.

For the islanders, Kells is the Grinch trying to steal Christmas, the huge gift they got from an awful government. They pray he'll disappear with the holidays. Ho, ho, ho!

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