



Watchdog rips 'rule slavery' in report

By **CHRISTINA BLIZZARD**

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TORONTO -- Civil servants need to find a cure for their "rulitis" and "grow a heart," says the province's ombudsman.

Andre Marin also wants the power to investigate complaints about the province's Children's Aid societies.

"Rule slavery is often at the root of complaints of perverse application of judgment by bureaucrats," Marin said as he released his first report yesterday. "Rules, policies and guidelines exist for a good reason but they are not foolproof and civil servants shouldn't always take the easy way out by mechanically and reflexively following them if their application leads to results which are palpably unfair or asinine.

"In far too many cases, we have seen compassion fatigue in the public service, and we are trying to get them to realize that sometimes you need to grow a heart."

Marin said he received a complaint concerning the Catholic Children's Aid Society's handling of the Jeffrey Baldwin case. Jeffrey, 5, was murdered by his grandmother, who had been awarded custody despite a previous child-abuse conviction.

Marin had no jurisdiction.

'RABID REACTION'

"I have been disappointed profoundly with the rabid reaction of CAS against oversight, and quite frankly it's left many people scratching their heads as well," Marin said.

Marin received the most complaints -- close to 5,000 -- about the Ministry of Correctional Services, although Marin acknowledged many of those complaints were from prison inmates and many were "trivial."

Next, with about 4,000 complaints, was the Municipal Property Assessment Corp.

Premier Dalton McGuinty said he would consider Marin's request for greater responsibility.

"I've had an opportunity to meet with the ombudsman directly to talk about this, and we will give this very careful consideration," McGuinty said in the legislature.

New Democrat MPP Andrea Horwath said ombudsmen in other provinces have such power and Ontario must "start catching up to the pack."